QUEER YOUTH SPEAK OUT: A STUDY OF QIY PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

A Thesis

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in

Education

(Behavioral Sciences Gender Equity Studies)

by

Rachel Elizabeth Pearman

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Graduate and Professional Studies in Education
Abstract

of

QUEER YOUTH SPEAK OUT: A STUDY OF QIY PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR
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Statement of Problem

The sexual identity of youth has an effect on their experiences in high school. Queer students are more likely to experience various degrees of bullying, verbal harassment, physical violence and sexual assault at the hands of their peers. Rienzo, Button, Sheu, and Li’s (2006) study determines that school environments are hostile to queers.

This study examined the support that queer adults perceive they received during their time in high school. The participants were given the opportunity to decide what support meant to them. In an effort to gather information on the totality of each participant’s time in high school, 18-20 year-olds who had the opportunity to graduate participated in the survey. This narrow age range was intended to ensure that the
emotional responses that occurred while participating in this research were similar to the emotions that the participating youth experienced in high school.

Research Participants

The participants of this research include 16 individuals, from across the country, who identify as queer. The participants are between 18 and 20 years of age, and have had the opportunity to graduate from high school. The researcher contacted participants in social groups at a local LGBT support center, through social media, and at local events and public venues. The researcher sent an email attaching a consent form (see Appendix A) and a survey (see Appendix B) consisting of open-ended questions to individuals interested in participating.

Conclusions Reached

The responses shared by the participants indicate that QIY who are supported by their peers, teachers, and administration are more likely to graduate from high school, and are more likely to go to college than QIY who are not supported by their peers, teachers, and administration. It appears that the support of teachers has a greater impact on QIY than support from administrators or peers. Respondents who were supported by teachers were the most likely to graduate and go to college while
respondents who were not supported by teachers were the least likely to graduate or go to college.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Dr. Lisa Y. William

_______________________
Date
DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my endlessly supportive family, friends, and wife. I have been fortunate to build a life with folks of strong character, integrity, and identity. Bold, caring, smart, and witty individuals surround me. And everyday, the people in my life demonstrate the intersections of their identities, the struggle of balancing work and family, and how to live a proud life. I thank each of them for being my teacher.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Carinci for her continued support of me, and the gender equity program, Dr. Lilly for seeing me through the human subjects committee process, and Dr. William for finally getting me through the finish line. I would like to thank Dr. Maher for reminding me that I can write a master’s thesis. I also thank my mother and father for instilling in me a desire for higher education and a greater understanding of the world in which we live. Finally, I want to thank my wife, Jen, for all that she has done and will do to support me, my education, and our life together.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of the Research</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Basis for the Study</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Thesis</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background of the Researcher</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Sexuality and Societal Expectations</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

(ix)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiences of Queer-Identified Youth</th>
<th>22</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Attitudes and Policies</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. METHODOLOGY</strong></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Design and Data Collection</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Instruments</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS</strong></td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey Results</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic Experiences of Respondents</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notable Findings</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND REFLECTIONS</strong></td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recommendations ........................................................................................................ 94

Reflections .................................................................................................................... 96

Appendix A.  Consent to Participate as a Research Subject ........................................ 98

Appendix B.  Survey ...................................................................................................... 102

References .................................................................................................................... 105
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Research Participants</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

xii
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age of Participants at the Time of the Study</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sexual Orientation Given by Participants</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Gender Identity as Described by Participants</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Participants’ Status as Out or Closeted while in High School</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Respondents Who Identified Positive and Negative Experiences with Peers</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Respondents Who Identified Positive and Negative Experiences with Teachers</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Respondents Who Identified Positive and Negative Experiences with Administrators</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Participants Who Reported Feeling Safe or Unsafe in School</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Respondents Completion of High School</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Significance of the Study

The concept of the invisible knapsack, developed by McIntosh, sheds light on the privileges of being white in western society. "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1989) is regarded as one of the first insights into white privilege by a white author. McIntosh explores the pervasive advantages to being white, including but not limited to: white children seeing themselves in curriculum, white skin color not undermining financial credibility, coworkers not considering white skin to be the reason someone is offered a job, and the people in positions of authority are typically white.

In western society, the privileges of being white are similar to those of being heterosexual, identifying with one’s birth sex, and identifying with one’s assigned gender. For members of minority communities, discrimination may be a concern when applying for a job or finding a home. Laws have been enacted to prevent housing and employment discrimination, but winning the hearts and minds of racist or heterosexist individuals continues to be a daily struggle for many marginalized communities. Being a member of a minority race or sexual identity may be viewed as an obstacle that individuals may overcome. Conversely, being white, or being heterosexual provides members of dominant communities with security.

White individuals do not have to consider how their race may impact their day. Similarly, heterosexuals do not have to think about how their sexuality may be perceived by each person with whom they interact. Generally, the dominant status of
white and heterosexual individuals allows them, if they wish, to remain oblivious to the struggle of minorities. One major difference between racially-motivated and sexually-based discrimination is that queer identities are frequently less visible, allowing queers to hide, or others to ignore, their minority status.

In Western society, heterosexuality is assumed and those who identify as queer often find themselves being viewed as different, separate, and apart from society. Hager’s “Invisible Knapsack II” highlights the ways that privilege affects the lives of those who identify as heterosexual and with the sex and gender assigned at birth. According to Hager (n.d.), people who are not queer are spared many undesirable experiences:

People don’t ask why I made my choice of sexual orientation … nobody calls me straight as an insult … when I talk about my heterosexuality I will not be accused of pushing my sexual orientation onto others … I do not have to fear that if my family or friends find out about my sexual orientation [or gender identity] there will be economic, emotional, physical or psychological consequences … I do not have to worry about whether I will be able to find a bathroom to use or whether I will be safe changing in a locker room … I am not required to undergo extensive psychological evaluation in order to receive basic medical care … Strangers do not ask me what my ‘real name’ [birth name] is and then assume that they have a right to call me by that name. (para. 2)
Many people, including educators, who benefit from the privileges of heteronormativity, have never considered their privileged status because, as Wittig (1981) explains, the heterosexual lens through which discourses of human sciences can be observed takes for granted that all societies are founded upon heterosexuality.

By the time queer youth are in high school, many of them have begun acknowledging that they are having same-sex attractions, and share their queer identity with others. A study by Reis and Saewyc (1999) found that 9% of high school students identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) or questioning (Q). Children who identify as LGB typically experience their first same-sex attraction between 9 and 10 years of age, and typically begin coming out at 16 (Reis & Saewyc, 1999). The fear and harassment that many of these high school students face creates a hostile environment, which may ultimately lead to an inability to thrive academically. A national survey found that LGBT students fared worse on many measures of academic achievement and school engagement than their peers; underachievement may manifest as a lower GPA, a higher likelihood of failing a class, and less positive feelings towards teachers or school in general (Pearson, Muller, & Wilkinson, 2007).

Educators are directly responsible for or at least complicit in the creation and perpetuation of school environments in which queer students are less likely to succeed than their heterosexual peers.

Educators’ complacency may be attributable to the assumed heterosexuality of all members of society, or it may be a belief that all individuals should be heterosexual. It is also possible that educators remain unaware of the ways that their
behavior can directly or indirectly effect the experiences of queer identified youth (QIY) in their schools. In any case, when educators do not protect queer students from bullying, support discriminatory policies, and allow heterosexism to exist in their classrooms they contribute to the social systems that continue to oppress the queer community. This study will explore the high school experiences of queer youth.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study sought to discover if queer identified adults believed they were offered support while in high school. Although there are various types of support that this research could have focused on, including emotional, social, psychological, and academic, the participants were allowed to decide what support meant to them. Additionally, the study examined the educational achievements of the participants. To this end, the research questions for this study were: do queers believe they were supported in high school, and what were the educational achievements of QIY?

**Statement of the Problem**

Because of the privileged status of heterosexuality in society, heterosexual youth and queer youth have different experiences in high school. The experiences of QIY are more likely to include various degrees of bullying, verbal harassment, physical violence and sexual assault at the hands of their peers. “To date, the school environment has been hostile to its inhabitants (peers and teachers) uninformed about [gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender] youth and their issues” (Rienzo, Button, Sheu, & Li, 2006, p. 96). Generally, when school personnel acknowledge a problem concerning queer students, there is typically one of two responses. The first is a
solution limited to the punishment of a student for harassing another, but without the development of a policy to reduce or eliminate the cause of the harassment. The second common response is that the faculty encourages the queer student to conform more strictly to normative gender roles (Mayberry, 2006, p. 263). Because of negative experiences in school, approximately 28% of queer youth drop out of high school (Lindley & Reiniger, 2001, pp. 17-18). While it may be easier for educators to try to ignore the problems encountered in schools by QIY, but ignorance will not protect queer students.

**History of the Research**

Some researchers over the past 30 years have examined the harassment and bullying of queer high school students (Herek & Berril, 1992; National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 1985). Other studies have focused on rates of assaults committed against queer high school students (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008; National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 1985; Russell, Franz, & Driscoll 2001). Bart (1998) examined the drop-out rates of QIY, Rotheram-Borus et al. (1994) studied substance use and abuse by queer students, and the National Network of Runaway and Youth Services (1991) studies homelessness among queer youth. Additionally, suicide ideation, attempts, and deaths among queer youth were studied (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997; Saunders & Valente, 1987).

Extensive research documenting the experience of QIY in American schools exists. Beginning in the 1980s academic journals focusing on psychology, gender studies, pediatrics, education, and sociology began studying QIY. Topics of these
studies include homelessness, STD rates, substance abuse, sexual abuse, mental health diagnoses, and rates of suicide (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Hammelman 1993; Hershberger, Pilkington, & D’Augelli, 1997; Kruks 1991; Savin-Williams, 1994). A common finding of studies focusing on QIY in schools is that homophobia, institutionalized or not, is identifiable at all grade levels (Daley, Solomon, Newman, & Mishna, 2007; Eder & Parker, 1987; Kosciw et al., 2008; Nayak & Kehily, 1996).

Beginning in the early 2000s, scholarship related to QIY focused on the specifics of the many negative and few positive experiences they faced in schools (Camille, 2002; Daley et. al., 2007; Koenig, 2008; Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002; Stader & Graca, 2007; Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009; Wyss, 2004). Some researchers tackled the study of positive and harmful school policies, and the challenges in changing policies for the better (Hansen, 2007; Macgillivray, 2004; Mayberry, 2006; Pace, 2004; Vicars, 2006). A few researchers focused on the intersections of queer and other marginalized identities (Taylor, 2006; Turner, 2002). Other researchers studied the impact of heteronormativity on QIY (D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Savage et al., 2004).

Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, and Koenig (2008) published a study involving nearly fourteen thousand Midwestern high school students with heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning sexual identities. The results provided insight into the mental health effects of parental relations and school climate. Ultimately, the researchers found that LGB and questioning students’ views of the school was related to the overall environment but support from family and friends was not enough to
overcome negative school experiences (Espelage et al., 2008, p. 211). This is true for questioning students who generally lack familial and peer support and are therefore more likely to turn to alcohol and drug use than their out queer peers (Espelage et al., 2008, p. 209). Questioning means exploring sexual identity and/or gender expression in ways that include, but are not limited to, one's upbringing, expectations from others, and inner motivation.

Schools have the ability to be safe places for queer students. Many schools are implementing various policies to support queer youth. These policies include staff development around LGBT issues (Hansen, 2007; Macgillivray, 2004; Vicars, 2006); written policies protecting students from harassment based on perceived gender or sexual orientation (Hansen, 2007; Macgillivray, 2004); fostering safe discussions of sexual minority, gender identity, and marginalization issues on campus and within the curriculum (Hansen, 2007; Mayberry, 2006); the availability of psychosocial support and gay straight alliance (GSA) clubs (Hansen, 2007); and ultimately the development support systems for QIY despite the fear of challenges (Pace, 2004). Although the full effects of these policies have yet to come to fruition, positive impacts are visible in those schools that are on the cutting edge of queer support services.

**Methodology**

This is a qualitative study utilizing feminist research methods, snowball sampling, and thematic analysis. Qualitative studies delve into the lives of sample populations and provide a comprehensive understanding of their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). This depth is necessary to understand both the experiences of
participants and also the impact that those experiences may have had on their educational achievements. Feminist research methodology is utilized because it justifies the validity of a queer female researcher studying QIY, and the utilization of the QIY’s knowledge (Olsen, 1998). This research model expands the acceptable subjects of study, the populations permitted to conduct studies, and how the results are determined (Vidich & Lyman, 1998). The inclusiveness of this model was foundational to the design of this study. Snowball sampling is utilized because it provides access to members of difficult-to-contact populations by utilizing the existing social connections within the population (Browne, 2005). After QIY participated in the study, they were given the opportunity to encourage their peers to become subjects as well. The researcher expects this method of sampling provides access to the greatest number participants.

The researcher utilized thematic data analysis to examine the responses from research participants. Thematic analysis is a search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon (Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997). Because many of the questions posed to participants were open-ended in nature, thematic analysis allowed the researcher to group similar topics together and see the emergence of patterns in the responses. A grid was constructed as themes emerged, then tallies were taken. The surveys were examined in their totality, rather than analyzing individual questions, and if a comment was made in two different questions, it was only counted once. Examining the responses as a whole, rather than comparing
answers to individual questions, allowed the researcher to gather a more accurate picture of the respondents’ particular experiences.

In an effort to gather information on the totality of each participant’s time in high school, 18-20 year-olds who had had the opportunity to graduate participated in the survey. This narrow age range was intended to ensure that the emotional responses that occurred while participating in this research were similar to the emotions that the participants experienced in high school. The age range of the participants was designed to dampen the differences of high school experiences that could be attributed to changing policies and attitudes over time. An assumption was that only schools that were supportive would have approved this type of research being conducted on a high school campus. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998), qualitative research exists to study subjects in as natural a setting as possible and to interpret the information in terms of what it meant to the participant (p. 3). The researcher attempted to gather participants from social groups at a local LGBT support center, through social media, and at local events and public venues. The researcher collected email addresses and offered an email address dedicated to the study. Upon receiving a request (in person, through email, or social media) to participate, the researcher would send an email, attaching a consent form (see Appendix A) and a survey (see Appendix B) consisting of open-ended questions.

**Limitations**

This research uses a survey distributed exclusively through email as a way of ensuring that all participants were able to have the same opportunities when
responding (to take their own time, to type and edit their responses, and to share the survey easily with peers). Additionally, email surveys allowed participants from across the country to respond because the participants’ experiences were not limited by geography.

While there are advantages to this method of distribution, there are several limitations. This method of distribution disproportionately excludes homeless and very-low-income youth. As feminist standpoint theory suggests, even though class is socially constructed it is still real. In the context of this study’s limitations, class may have a real effect on a youth’s ability to participate in this research. Participants of this research are limited to individuals who identify as part of the queer community, thus excluding youth who may have been negatively affected by heterosexist attitudes in school, but do not identify as queer. This research is limited to those youth who received the survey and chose to respond. The study is further limited to the information that participants chose to disclose. None of the information provided by the participants can be verified, and as the researcher does not have a relationship with many of the participants beyond the survey, the reliability of the participants’ perceptions can be questioned.

The research may also be limited by the passage of time between high school and participation in this research resulting in misremembered experiences. With the passing of time, participants might view their time in high school as less or more traumatic than they felt while in school. In addition to the effects on perception, in the years since many of the participants left high school, policies may have evolved, in
many places laws have been enacted protecting students regardless of sexual orientation, and social acceptance of the queer community has increased. It is possible that the experiences of the research participants are not the same as current queer high school students.

The researcher is limited by personal experiences, which may have impacted this study. Although the researcher identified as heterosexual in high school, the researcher is now a member of the queer community. Because of this history the researcher has an understanding of the privilege that was lost after coming out, but does not have personal experiences of being queer in high school on which to draw. Through social and professional interactions and conversations with other queer-identified people about their individual experiences in school, the researcher made assumptions about the experiences of QIY as a demographic in schools. It is likely that either or both of these experiences have created limitations for this study.

**Theoretical Basis for the Study**

This study’s framework and epistemology reside at the intersection of feminist standpoint as constructed by Haraway (in Sprague, 2005) and Butler’s (2006) establishment of queer theory. These frameworks acknowledge that while the constructs of gender and sexuality are produced by society and are therefore changeable, their pressure on individuals is still a real and integral part of one’s life. Without a framework that included these concepts, it would not be possible to explain how social expectations affect the relationship between students who are rebelling
against these pressures, and educational institutions and educators who try to maintain the social constructions of gender and sexuality.

**Feminist Standpoint Theory**

This research utilizes Haraway’s anthropological vision of feminist standpoint theory. Haraway asserts that the best way to understand one’s view of the world is to examine others’ perspectives (Sprague, 2005, p. 43). Feminist standpoint postulates that gender (along with race, class, national origin, religion) is a social construction that has real-world implications. Standpoint postulates, “that experiences, identities, and social locations are productive of particular kinds of knowledge” (Zimmerman, 2005, p. 31). Individual standpoints develop from a “combination of resources available within a specific context from which an understanding might be constructed” (Sprague, 2005, p. 41). Feminist standpoint theory postulates that the researcher, as a member of the population being studied, is at an advantage, being well-positioned to have a better understanding of the experiences of the participants. Operating from a feminist standpoint one acknowledges that each individual in society plays a role in fostering the development and persistence of artificially created social categories and each person is therefore influenced by society. Society’s continuing belief in the permanence of these constructs is what makes them real and allows them to impact the lives of individuals.

Based on a particular standpoint societal expectations are developed. One societal expectation is that gender roles are produced and divided according to physical sex. Only by seeing other perspectives can one understand the limitations of
one’s own expectations. Feminist standpoint theory argues, “that all knowledge is constructed in a specific matrix of physical location, history, culture, and intersections” (Sprague, 2005, p. 41). Feminist standpoint asserts that while gender and other categories of social classification (race, class) are socially constructed, and changeable, they are still real. Furthermore, each individual’s experience with gender, both its construction and expression as well as the combination of all other social classifications, form the point at which they view the rest of society and evaluate their place within it (Sprague, 2005, p. 43).

**Queer Theory**

Butler’s assertions move beyond the understandings of feminist standpoint theory. Butler’s (2006) groundbreaking work is considered foundational in the development of queer theory (Singh & Singamsetty, 2007). Butler's (2006) work on gender regulation postulates that sexuality and gender expression are socially constructed; furthermore forced participation in gender norms and the regulation of individuals by those same constructs does not mean that they are derived from nature. Butler (2006) states that gender is not natural but is used in the regulation of societal roles. Queer theory explains that genders are created by society and that they are neither true nor false. Gender exists only because individuals in a society expect to see gender expressed, and therefore it is sought and seen on each body.

The maintaining of hierarchies among genders and establishing acceptable behaviors based on one’s assigned gender is not the only function of an individual’s forced participation in the regulation of gender roles. This pressure also serves the
purpose of maintaining compulsory heterosexuality. Butler (2006) argues that the compulsory “production of gender effects a false stabilization of gender in the interests of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality” (pp. 184-185). Ultimately, as society regulates appropriate gender behavior, individuals are forced into heterosexuality because that is the only way to comply with their assigned gender roles.

**Educational Theories**

The theories about education utilized by this study include those of Freire, hooks, Martin, and Noddings. These individuals formed the theoretical basis for understanding the role of schools and educators in the development of individuals, and the imparting of knowledge to learners.

Freire (2009) expands the definition of who has knowledge and how that knowledge is imparted to learners. Students are not intended to simply receive information that is provided to students by an educator who is always correct (Freire, 2009). Information can be shared between teachers and students, information can be debated, and each participant can reach individual conclusions. The advancement in educational theory that hooks (1994) developed is rooted in a political context. For hooks (1994) educators must self-actualize and then begin the collective engagement of students in the learning process. hooks challenges educators and learners to engage critically with the material, their personal histories, and with one another. Martin (1999) focuses on a classroom environment and pedagogy that strive for change, rooted in the idea that schools can and should provide support similar to that of family.
Finally, Noddings (2005) prizes the concept of “care” as a part of the holistic approach to education. Education can and should address care for the self, others, and the world. Noddings’s work is foundational in the understanding that all students should have equal access to education. Noddings ultimately contends that educators have the ability to influence their students and community.

These educational theorists imagine that schools can and should do more than impart facts to students. Schools and educators can also participate in the learning process by being open to the lessons of their students. Educators can care for their students and encourage their students to care for others. Finally, education can have an effect not only on students in the classroom, but on the community as a whole. Along with standpoint theory’s capacity to weave multiple identities and establish a context for the individual to understand others, and queer theories identifying the development of gender as a means to coerce heterosexuality, the educational theories described above provide the necessary perspective to understand the relationship between educators and queer youth.

**Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this research, the following terms will be used:

**Allies** are individuals that are supportive of one or more identities within the queer community; allies may choose to identify with the queer community (Ohio University LGBT Center, 2009).

**Bisexual** people are emotionally, spiritually, physically, and sexually attracted to members of more than one gender (Ohio University LGBT Center, 2009).
Coming out is the life-long process of discovering, defining, and proclaiming one's own sexuality, gender identity, or status as an intersexed person to oneself, family, friends, and others (Ohio University LGBT Center, 2009).

Closeted refers to an LGBTI person who will not or cannot disclose their sex, sexuality, sexual orientation or gender identity to their friends, family, co-workers, or society. It can also refer to one who has come out to only a few people. There are varying degrees of being "in the closet"; for example, a person can be out in their social life, but in the closet at work or within family (Ohio University LGBT Center, 2009).

Feminist research uses feminist principles throughout all stages of research, from choice of topic to presentation of data. Methodologically, feminist research seeks to remove the power imbalance between research and subject in order to validate the perspectives of the participants as the experts of their own reality; it is politically motivated and has a major role in changing social inequality - research for the sake of research is insufficient; and it begins with standpoints and experiences based in gender (Evergreen State College, n.d.).

Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) are student-initiated and student-run clubs in a public or private school. The goal of a GSA is to provide a safe, supportive environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning (LGBTQ) and straight ally youth to meet and discuss sexual orientation and gender identity issues, and to work to create a school environment free of discrimination, harassment, and intolerance (GSA Network, 2011).
Gender expression is the way that an individual displays gender to the world (Ohio University LGBT Center, 2009).

Heteronormativity is the assumption, in individuals or in institutions, that everyone is heterosexual, and that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality and bisexuality (Ohio University LGBT Center, 2009).

Heterosexism is a term analogous to sexism and racism, describing an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community (Herek, 1990).

Lesbians and gay men have emotional, physical, spiritual, and sexual attractions to members of the same-sex (Ohio University LGBT Center, 2009).

Pansexual individuals are attracted to all or many gender expressions (Green & Peterson, 2004).

Queer is an inclusive, unifying sociopolitical umbrella term for people who have any of the previously listed identities. Additionally, it may denote other non-heteronormative sexualities or gender identities. For the purpose of this paper, queer describes any individual who identifies with any of the previously listed identities. The most common way of discussing the queer community at large is as the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. This acronym is more widely accepted than queer, but it is also more limiting (Halberstam, 2005).

Questioning means exploring sexual identity and or gender expression in ways that include, but are not limited to, one's upbringing, expectations from others and inner motivation (Ohio University LGBT Center, 2009).
**Snowball Sample** allows the researcher to collect data from the members of the target population available, and then requests that they provide assistance in accessing other participants from members of that population whom they know (Babbie, 2001).

**Transgender** is an umbrella term for people who transgress society's view of gender and biological sex as necessarily fixed, unmoving, and following from one's biological sex. Individuals who were born women but identify as men may be called transmen (short hand for transgender men); conversely individuals born as men who identify as women may be called transwomen (Ohio University LGBT Center, 2009).

**Thematic Analysis** is a widely-used qualitative data analysis method that focuses on identifying patterned meaning across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Organization of the Thesis**

The organization of this thesis is as follows. Chapter 2 provides a background of the existing research pertaining to societal expectations of gender and sexuality, the experiences of many QIY, and common school administrative policies and attitudes. Chapter 3 presents the study’s methodology including the study design, data collection, research questions and instruments, an introduction to the research participants, the setting, and research procedures. Chapter 4 is a discussion of the data, including the results of the survey and experiences of the respondents. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the findings, recommendations, and conclusions reached by the study.
Background of the Researcher

Rachel Pearman earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Government from California State University Sacramento in 2006. While attending the university, she interned in the Sacramento office of Assemblymember Laird and the Washington D.C. office of Congresswoman Matsui. She volunteered time with the Women’s Resource Center and the PRIDE Center on campus as well as facilitating the Queer Straight Alliance. After completing her degree, she began working for the nonprofit organization Breaking Barriers Community Services Center as the Client Services Manager. In this position she supervised staff, provided services to individuals living with HIV and AIDS, wrote grants, and acted as a liaison to other nonprofits in the Sacramento area. After leaving Breaking Barriers, she began working for WEAVE, Inc., a domestic violence and sexual assault services agency. In this capacity, she continued to write grants and oversaw the accounting and progress reporting for all government-funded programs. As her professional career developed, she noticed that queer-identified individuals appeared to be underrepresented in positions of authority, and frequently held less-advanced degrees. A desire to understand if this apparent underachievement could be linked to the availability or lack of support provided the initial motivation for studying the experience of queer youth’s high school experience.
Chapter 2
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

At the same time that researchers have been evaluating the status of QIY, both in society at large and in schools specifically, feminist and queer theorists have developed arguments against the eternalness of the social construction of gender and sexuality (Butler, 2006; Nielsen, 1990). This confluence of research into the position and understanding of queer individuals leads to an increasing understanding that QIY in schools are frequently harassed and bullied because they refuse to conform to impermanent socially constructed expectations of their sexuality and gender. The culmination of previous research suggests that believing social constructions are permanent leads to high school experiences for many QIY that are more difficult than the experiences of heterosexual students.

Gender Sexuality and Societal Expectations

Butler (2006) compiles and analyzes decades of beliefs regarding gender expression and sexuality within Western society. Through this analysis, Butler argues that gender and sexuality exist on a continuum, that each society manifests parameters for acceptable expressions of each, and that deviations from accepted norms result in punitive consequences. For Butler (2006) the body is an “instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related,” meaning that each society determines how bodies should be manifest and forces their compliance both in terms of gender expression and sexuality (p. 12). Queer theory explores how and why
genders are constructed to open up the field of possibility for gender, not to prescribe new correct ways of being gendered (Butler, 2006). In actuality, according to Wittig, “men and women are political categories and not natural facts” (as cited in Butler, 2006, p. 157).

What this means for high school students, and for QIY in particular, is that there is no one, or two, or even three correct sexual identities or ways to express gender. The possible combinations of sexual identity, gender identity, and gender expression are unlimited. A student may be attracted to boys, girls, both, or neither. Any individual may identify as a boy or a girl or neither. An individual born male or female may display feminine traits, masculine traits, both masculine and feminine traits, or androgynous traits inclining neither toward masculine or feminine. A student of any gender or sexuality may aspire to be a cheerleader, a jock, or the lead in a school play. Furthermore, sexuality and gender do not bestow any inherent talent to succeed or fail in these attempts.

As early as the 1860s, queers became the focus of inquiry for medical, psychiatric, and legal professionals (Ford, 2013). In 1953, President Eisenhower signed an executive order stating that homosexuality was an ample and critical reason to fire a federal employee, and homosexuality was even considered a mental illness by the American Psychological Association until 1973 (Ford, 2013). In the United States, hate crimes based on sexual orientation are second only to those based on race, and are on the rise (Human Rights Campaign [HRC], 2012). Strict enforcement of gender and sexuality is deemed necessary because, as Witting (1981) asserts, most individuals
believe that “what founds society, any society, is heterosexuality” (p. 105). The understanding that heterosexuality is believed to be foundational to the existence of civilization may explain why society denies and demonizes individuals who flout the culturally mandated heteronormativity (Butler, 2006).

Same-sex attraction threatens the stability of gender role constructions as well as the individuals who benefit from them. Reproduction is frequently used to explain why heterosexuality is acceptable and all other sexualities are impossibilities; nature is used to justify socially constructed roles for men and women. According to the Chicago Tribune one of the seven reasons homosexuality is immoral is because “homosexual acts, like homosexual relationships, have no biological purpose because they can’t result in the birth of children” (Zorn, 2007, para. 3). Heterosexism is the result of society’s unwillingness to relinquish the stability of compulsory heterosexuality and the socially mandated and disparate roles of men and women.

**Experiences of Queer-Identified Youth**

**Heterosexism**

Examples of heterosexism in the United States in the 1990s and early 2000s include the “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy preventing queers from serving openly in the military until its repeal in 2011 and state sodomy laws that were not declared unconstitutional until 2003. Between 1998 and 2008, 13 states passed same-sex marriage bans; moreover at the time of this writing, it is still legal in 29 states for employers to discriminate against queers (HRC, 2013). These laws and policies are examples of how heterosexism permeates society. Heterosexism is the underlying
cause of the harassment, bullying, lack of support, and lack of resources available to QIY in schools (Center for Disease Control [CDC], 2011; Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). Educators, parents, and students are influenced by heterosexist attitudes that are introduced into the curriculum, policies, and social interactions.

“Heated debates over gay-straight student alliances, inclusion of GLBT youth in important school functions such as proms, and sexuality orientation education illustrates the extent to which public schools have become a battleground within the culture war conflicts in the United States” (Rienzo et al., 2006, p. 93). Public debate on these issues is found in news articles and in editorial boards across the county. In Mississippi, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) became involved when a school district informed a lesbian student she could not attend the school prom with her girlfriend (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2010). According to Kosciw et al. (2012), although public schools “shall” permit GSAs some individuals opposed to their creation continue to find ways to prevent them, or limit QIY’s access to the club. In 2011, a Minnesota school district debated the validity of a policy that directed teachers to remain neutral on issues of sexuality that arose from student led discussion. A vocal parent group worked to keep the policy in place despite the policy having led to two lawsuits against the district (Baca, 2012). Heterosexism is a significant barrier to overcome before policy changes, designed to include queer participation in society, can be implemented.
The administrators in Mississippi, parents in Minnesota, and the forces attempting to prevent the creation of GSAs are heterosexist, and are likely motivated by an historical expectation that each member of society is or should be heterosexual. Heterosexism stems from a continued belief that sexuality and gender identity derive from nature. According to Butler (2006) not only are these constructions not natural, but they are forced upon each individual in society as a way to compel conformity despite sexuality and gender being variable and changeable. In recent decades it has become more acceptable for adults to identify as queer, but the pressure on QIY to conform to heterosexual expectation comes from multiple sources including religious, legal, and social institutions (Kitzinger, 2005; Nielsen, Walden, & Kunkel, 2000; Weeks, 1985).

Heterosexism in schools may manifest as heteronormative curriculum, harassing language, or disagreements over policies allowing two students of the same-sex to attend a school dance together. Educators are often not aware of the specific children who suffer because of official or unofficial policies or how damaging they can be to QIY. Administrators understand that they must answer to a community that may not agree with a change in policy that is supportive of QIY (Rienzo et al., 2006). Springer, the principal of Sullivan High School in Indiana was questioned by a local reporter about whether same-sex couples would be allowed to attend the school prom as a couple. He replied, “anybody can go to the prom” (Webley, 2013, para. 2). In response to this statement several students, community members, parents, and a teacher at the high school decided to host what they determined to be a traditional
prom. A teacher that is a member of this group was quoted as saying, “I believe [homosexuality] is a choice. I don’t believe they were born that way. I think that life circumstances made them that way” (Webley, 2013, para. 4). She went on to say that she cares about her students who have come out, but disagrees with them.

**Common Experiences**

“Gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (Butler, 1997, p. 421). Punishment for breaking gendered expectations is as true in schools as it is in the rest of society. Consider dress codes that restrict the gender of the clothing that schools permit students to wear; because of societal conditioning children understand, from a young age, how they are supposed to act, even if they do not always oblige. Part of this performance is behaving correctly as a boy or girl and, at an appropriate age, being attracted to the opposite sex. Regardless of a student’s geographical location, religion, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background, if they are queer they are likely to have an experience, a fear, or a secret in common with other queer youth. This is because queer youth understand that they are not conforming, and that such behavior is dangerous.

Not long ago, social media and news organizations were reporting on a controversy that arose because a parent allowed a little boy to wear pink zebra-striped shoes to pre-school (Huntsman, 2012). A study conducted by Patrick, Bell, Huang, Lazarakis, & Edwards, (2010) focuses on the bullying of youth based on their
perceived sexual orientation. This perception is correlated to gender presentation and its possible conflict with gender expectations. In this study, 14% of eighth grade boys and 11% of eighth grade girls experienced bullying because of their perceived sexual orientation (Patrick et al., 2013). Furthermore, masculine students, regardless of their sex, are more likely to aspire to athleticism; students who are not masculine aspire to be popular or a leader in high school (Patrick et al., 2013).

Solomon (2002) reports incidents of anti-gay attitudes and beliefs among elementary school students; homophobia may be a part of the entire primary and secondary educational experience of QIY. More than 80% of queer and questioning students experience verbal harassment; 90% said that other students rarely or never intervene, and 74% of transgender youth reported sexual harassment (Solomon, 2002). Evidence suggests that the rates of harassment increase based on the extent to which gender norms are challenged (Daley et al., 2007, p. 15). Six percent of Seattle high school students reported experiencing verbal or physical harassment related to their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity; of these students, 66% identified as heterosexual. Wyss (2004) states, “many teachers and school staff refuse to intervene, sometimes claiming that queer teens bring this harassment on themselves” (p. 710). Eventually, students start to believe that their refusal to conform may be justification for the harassment that they experience.

**Negative Consequences**

Wyss (2004) reports that the effects of this kind of torment can be far-reaching, dramatic, and can severely affect QIY’s self-esteem. According to Reis and Saewyc
(1999), QIY are between four and eleven times more likely to take laxatives or vomit frequently due to negative body images (p. 7). QIY are more likely to have severe drug and alcohol incidents, including significantly higher rates of heavy drinking (six+ drinks in a sitting) and cocaine use (Reis & Saewyc, 1999, p. 7). Furthermore, 28% of queer students will drop out of school; this is more than three times the national average for heterosexual students (Reis & Saewyc, 1999, p. 7). These high dropout rates may be because 80% of queer youth do not know one supportive teacher in their school (Mental Health America, 2006). Of the estimated 1.6 million homeless American youth, between 20% and 40% identify as queer (Munoz-Plaza et al., 2002, para. 6). Queer youth are between four and six times as likely to have been treated by a medical professional resulting from a suicide attempt in the last 12 months (Reis & Saewyc, 1999, p. 7). Of queer youth of color, 41% of girls and 35% of boys had attempted suicide. Furthermore, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services cited in a 2002 article by Munoz-Plaza et al., suicide is the leading cause of death for queer and questioning youth (para. 6). QIY are more likely to feel unsafe at school and are more likely to be unable to identify a single faculty member who is safe to approach. Even students who receive support at home struggle when the support is lacking at school (Koenig, 2008).

Compounding this hostile situation is the reality that QIY, unlike other minority youth, have two additional challenges in unsupportive school environments. First, they are an invisible minority who may or may not choose to reveal their minority status. Secondly, their parents may or may not be a source of support for the
student as an individual and an advocate within the school. These circumstances can make it challenging to create supportive programming and services for youth in need. Ultimately, the consequences of non-supportive programming can have dire effects on queer youth, ranging from substance use to truancy to suicide.

**Gender Nonconforming Experiences**

It is estimated that between 2% and 5% of the population is transgender (Transgender Law and Policy Institute, 2010). In 2011, a report on the experiences of trans-identified students was presented as testimony to Congress by the National Center for Transgender Equality. Key findings of the study were that 76% of trans-identified adults reported experiencing verbal abuse, 35% reported physical abuse, and 11% reported sexual abuse while in school (Grant et al., 2011). The study goes on to find that abuse while in school leads to higher rates of unemployment, homelessness, incarceration, as well as drug and alcohol abuse (Grant et al., 2011).

Of transgender students, 90% heard negative remarks about someone’s gender expression sometimes, often, or frequently in school. Remarks about students not acting “masculine” enough were more common than remarks about students not acting “feminine” enough (82% vs. 77% hearing remarks sometimes, often, or frequently) (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009). A third of transgender students heard school staff make homophobic (32%) remarks, sexist (39%) remarks, and negative comments about someone’s gender expression (39%) sometimes, often, or frequently in the past year (Greytak et al., 2009). Transgender students experiencing high levels of harassment were more likely to report that they were not planning to attend college
than those experiencing lower levels of harassment (verbal harassment based on sexual orientation: 42% vs. 30%; gender expression: 40% vs. 30%; gender: 49% vs. 32%) (Greytak et al., 2009). Less than half (46%) of transgender students reported that they could find information about LGBT people, history, or events in their school library and only a third (31%) were able to access this information using the school Internet (Greytak et al., 2009).

Frequently, when society acknowledges the existence of something that was previously denied, such as the transgender community, individuals have a tendency to believe that it is new rather than considering that perhaps they just did not know about it before. Feinberg (1992) explains:

Transgendered women and men have always been here. They are oppressed. But they are not merely products of oppression. It is passing that’s historically new. Passing means hiding. Passing means invisibility. Transgendered people should be able to live and express their gender without criticism or threats of violence. But that is not the case today. (p. 135)

Furthermore, transgender individuals should feel secure enough in their schools to be out and to express their gender identity freely. Feinberg (1992) makes an observation that is relevant to all minorities, while discussing language that is ascribed to the transgender community; “we didn’t choose these words. They don’t fit all of us. It’s hard to fight an oppression without a name connoting pride, a language that honors us” (p. 134). Language that has been developed by society’s dominant culture to discuss
QIY is the only language that is available to educators and policymakers tasked with the safety and well-being of students.

**Administrative Attitudes and Policies**

**Hostile Policies**

School environments are often hostile to queer and questioning students. This can manifest in several ways. Savage et al. (2004) found that 85% of school psychologists reported that the graduate programs they attended did not address the needs of gay or lesbian youth. Those who did receive information on this topic reported that the content was generally limited to one lecture or class discussion (Savage et al., 2004). Such a low level of training is insufficient for anyone who is working in a school. However, this bad situation is even worse considering that the school counselor may be the only resource offered to queer or questioning youth or for administrators and teachers to turn to in order to advocate for QIY.

Some schools are limited in their services to QIY due to fear on the part of some administrators. In one report, a school principal, Pace, admitted that his attitudes came not from a personal, religious or moral view of sexuality. Rather, its origin was purely managerial and administrative. Pace (2004) confesses, “I simply did not think that our school and community were ready to handle the issue” (p. 15). Mayberry (2006) found that other school administrators and teachers take a more hostile approach including “[denying] the existence of LGBT students by failing to acknowledge the ways in which these teens confront a school environment within which they are socially marginalized and stigmatized” (p. 262). Furthermore, silence
is the key to the policy that many educators employ regarding the struggles of queer and questioning students and this policy leads to greater “feelings of isolation and invisibility in their schools” (Mayberry 2006, p. 263). Regardless of the readiness of heterosexuals in a school and community to acknowledge the needs of QIY, or the attempts to deny or ignore the lack of support offered to QIY, these youth are suffering as a result of harmful policies enforced by administrators.

**Silence as Communication**

Educators’ unwillingness to acknowledge the needs of queer students does not mean that conversations regarding and involving them cease to take place. QIY engage in silent communication with one-another, in school, using ‘gaydar’. Esposito and Baez (2008) state that “when schools refuse to acknowledge anything but heterosexuality (in its overt and hidden curricula), they collude in the necessity of gaydar but only by requiring gay and lesbian students to speak such silence to each other and perhaps implicitly permitting the gay basher or harasser to also speak such silence” (p. 129). Because there is little or no faculty recognition of silent communication, it may become another tool used to harass queer students. Baez and Esposito (2008) explain, “the power of heteronormativity and how it upholds the silence of homosexuality, [faculty] continue to be complacent in maintaining the need for gaydar as a silence that speaks only to and about abject bodies” (p. 129). Educators may be content to allow silence to be the primary method of communication about the topic of queer identities; unfortunately the result is that QIY are left to navigate
unregulated interactions in which they may attempt simultaneously to connect with friendly peers and avoid harassment from those who would do them harm.

Silence affects QIY not only by employing gaydar but also through social conditioning that teaches individuals that there are topics that are taboo. As educators view sexuality and gender expression in this light, there is pressure to say nothing rather than teach lessons about identity and diversity utilizing queerness as a foundation. Noddings (2005) argues:

We live in an age both blessed and encumbered by a new orthodoxy in speech. Ethnic, racial and gender jokes are out, and for the most part that is a good thing. We are properly aware that words can hurt badly and even inflict real and lasting harm. But, as our language is purged, our fears, misgivings, and dislikes sink into a layer of the Psyche that Carl Jung called the “Shadow.” This is the individual and collective side we deny. Continuous denial does not destroy the shadow. It stays with us, and sometimes creates a spontaneous explosion of verbal or physical violence. (p. 120)

By relegating communication about their identities to the shadow of taboo, educators unwittingly teach their students that the queer community is unworthy of any acknowledgement, and that the expression of such identities is something to be discouraged.

**Educators’ Knowledge**

Individuals choose to educate because of a desire to affect positively the lives of children and young adults. Teaching is more than providing facts to students for
memorization. Martin (1999) argues “Dewey called upon us to educate ‘the whole child.’ I, in turn, ask that we educate all our children in our whole heritage so that they will learn to live in the world together” (p. 163). Educators understand that too often society undervalues their role, but it is not lost on hooks (1994) who argues:

There is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred . . . our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. (p. 186)

This attitude is the key to creating a positive learning environment for all students. Unfortunately, such an environment does not yet exist for many QIY.

The study of gender bias in the classroom developed in the later part of the 20th century, but the disparities between boys and girls in the classroom can be traced back to the colonial beginnings of the United States (Freeman, 1989; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Since the 1980s research has been conducted exploring the numerous inequities present in the educational system based on gender; inequities are largely due to the gender biases educators bring to their classrooms (Lips, 1989; Pace & Townsend, 1999; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Tiedemann, 2002). Of the current gender-based inequities, many shortchange girls in the classroom (Carinci, 2007; Sadker & Sadker, 1994), and few shortchange boys (Tournaki, 2003). Although these inequities have been well documented for more than three decades, their resolution has been hampered by a lack of consistent teacher training on equitable teaching practices to
address the educational inequities between girls and boys or between QIY and heterosexual students.

Teacher education programs rarely include gender equity training and instruction on gender-equitable teaching practices (Owens, Smothers, & Love, 2003). The incorporation of gender awareness in teacher education is scarcely addressed in the national standards (Carinci, 2001). Only a few states incorporate gender equity issues in their teacher credentialing programs. However, gender equity training is not a universal requirement and many educators have not received training about gender equity. There has been very little research conducted on the prevalence and success of gender equity training for teachers. The research that has been conducted on the effectiveness of gender equity training indicates that its use is successful in limiting gender bias in the classroom (Jones, Evans, Byrd, & Campbell, 2000; Tracy & Lane, 1999). Just as training related to gender equity reduces gender-based inequities in the classroom, it is likely that trainings could have a similar effect on biases related to actual or perceived queer identities.

In-service trainings for current educators to address how issues of sexual orientation and gender expression bias affect students are becoming common (Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013). Unfortunately, little research has been done to determine the effectiveness of such trainings. However, what research does exist suggests that even brief trainings can be effective in changing the beliefs of educators (Greytak et al., 2013). Just as trainings to alleviate gender bias are offered inconsistently among states and teaching programs, trainings to address bias toward
QIY are offered randomly by districts and are often attended by individual educators who elect to participate in such trainings (Greytak et al., 2013). Trainings need to be required of all educators if the bias regarding QIY is to be eliminated.

Unless training becomes more pervasive, educators as a whole may continue to be unaware of the negative effects that homophobic language may have on QIY’s social development and the development of positive self-esteem. What is clear is that there are few consistent repercussions for students who engage in the verbal or physical harassment of QIY. For example, Mayberry (2006) finds that generally when school personnel acknowledge a problem concerning queer students they opt for one of two responses. The first response is a limited solution involving punishment for a student harassing another, but no policy is adopted to help reduce the harassment. The second response is faculty encouraging the queer student to conform more strictly to normative gender roles. Macgillivray (2004) noted that:

The depression and resulting marginalization of students based on their real or perceived sexual orientation, as well as gender identity expression, robs them of the opportunity to participate fully in school and can retard their developmental growth into adults with positive self-identities. (p. 347)

The school environment is a scary place for QIY. Rienzo et al. (2006) commented that QIY experience hostility in school due to a lack of informed staff and faculty and “as a result, ignorance, intolerance, and even violence persist in this society” (p. 96). For teachers to create the educational experience envisioned by Dewey, hooks, and Martin, educators must become educated and understand the experiences of their
queer students, be actively engaged in preventing heterosexism from taking root in their schools, and advocate for the implementation of policies to support the emotional, social, civic, and academic development of all students.

**Positive Policies**

Fear is a motivator for maintaining the status quo. However, there are schools and districts that are advancing and supporting all students, regardless of sexuality and gender expression. These positive policies include: the development and enforcement of nondiscrimination policies; policies barring the use of hate language; providing psychological support; staff development, and training in queer issues; the inclusion of sexual minorities in the curriculum; the creation of safe spaces to discuss sexual identities; allowing QIY to attend school sponsored functions with same-sex partners; and even addressing heterosexism in the surrounding community (Hansen, 2007; Macgillivray, 2004; Mayberry, 2006; Pace, 2004; Vicars, 2006). According to Hansen (2007) there is nearly unanimous consent that success depends on “establishing a clear and explicit written policy that forbids harassment in the school” (p. 844). Finally, while the development of spaces specifically for QIY can lead to the isolation of QIY from their peers and the labeling of QIY as “others” rather than folding them into the student population in a supportive way, students at many schools report that the existence of a GSA or a Safe Space has helped them feel more comfortable, confident, and safe at school (Lee, 2002; Mayberry, 2006). Ultimately, no one solution is the answer to creating a supportive learning environment for QIY; the approach should be holistic and tailored to meet the needs of the student population.
Some of these options may have the potential to be more beneficial to QIY than others, but each educator that implements a new policy designed to support QIY does so in an effort to support their entire student body. The first step is for faculty to understand that there are repercussions for language, harassment and silence. Vicars (2006) stated:

I have come to recognize how speech acts can reinforce a teleological paradigm of sexuality in which an identity is bestowed through the declaration of the object choice alone. . . . Increasingly, I find myself getting caught up in debates about what is and is not appropriate behavior and what is and is not appropriate knowledge within the compulsory years of schooling. (pp. 352-353)

This evolved understating leads to the development of queer and questioning supportive programs and educational opportunities. Noddings (2005) specifically argues, “Women, Blacks, Native Americans and other groups need the opportunities to study their own rich histories and celebrate their cultures” (p. 114). The incorporation of lessons about the queer community validates the lives and experiences of the queer youth in attendance.

**Best Practices**

Stader and Graca (2007) outline six steps to create more supportive schooling environments: sexual harassment training that includes sexual orientation, uniform reporting for all harassment, education regarding the harmful nature of homophobia, a no tolerance policy for homophobia, uniform disciplinary standards for all harassment,
and data collection on the extent to which students harass each other based on sexual orientation. This holistic approach to policy implementation addresses the limitations of implementing a safe space without implementing broader policies to reduce harassment in the school. These spaces, without fundamental changes, only reinforce the otherness of the queer and questioning students.

Martin (1999) laments that:

Even when this nation’s heritage is defined multiculturally, it is all too easy for school to instruct children about it without ever teaching them to be active and constructive participants in living – let alone how to make the world a better place for themselves and their progeny. (p. 163)

This idea of proactive multicultural education parallels the active inclusion of queer identities in the development of society. Mayberry (2006) echoes this concept when stating that systemic changes must occur to improve schools and create the ideal environment for QIY. Creating spaces where the labels of normal and deviant are analyzed, support for marginalized students on campus is examined, and students’ feelings about their identities are explored, are examples of this kind of systematic change. The inclusion of discussions about the construction of identities should be encouraged in academic settings. Hansen (2007) explained:

Schools may need to provide direct support services, social opportunities, and school climate improvements that increase safety and comfort for sexual minority youth. School climate is particularly important because questioning
and undisclosed GLBT youth may not be identified for services, but require support nonetheless. (p. 839)

Ultimately the one thing upon which nearly all researchers agree is that the implementation of a clearly “written policy that forbids harassment in school” is required to end homophobic harassment in schools (Hansen, 2007, p. 844). Students who have experienced harassment based on their perceived sexuality or gender expression want their “teachers and other staff [to] speak out” (Hansen, 2007, pp. 844-845). There are many ways for educators to show support for QIY, and few are as easy as not allowing harassment toward QIY to be tolerated.

For students who are fortunate enough to attend schools that are supportive of them, the positive effects can be dramatic. After starting a GSA in their school, one group of students participated in a study that found several positive changes. After belonging to a GSA, members are more likely to aspire to college and have increased feelings of “hope for their academic future” (Lee, 2002, para. 23). They were also more likely to perceive that they were doing better in school, even if their grades did not reflect a change (Lee, 2002, para. 22). The participants also believed that their involvement led to better relationships with school staff and their classmates (Lee, 2002, para. 33). Finally, they had a more defined sense of self and higher self-worth (Lee, 2002, para. 36). A supportive learning environment should be available to all students.
Barriers to Creating These Policies

Oppressed communities have fought to be included in the development of pedagogies but, because of their oppressed status, have often been unsuccessful in their attempts to participate. Freire (2009) stated:

Many political and education plans have failed because their authors designed them according to their own personal views of reality, never once taking into account (except as mere objects of their actions) the men-in-a-situation to whom their program was ostensibly directed. (p. 94)

For these reasons queers need to be included in the development of the policies that are intended to protect and support QIY. Dismantling the institutional barriers to full and equal participation of queers in schools cannot be accomplished without the knowledge provided by queer individuals who experienced these challenges.

According to Macgillivray (2004) many conservative parents and community members fear that policies that protect and support queer students will lead students to believe that it is okay to be gay, something that they firmly believe is not acceptable. Macgillivray (2004) goes on to argue that in spite of these concerns, school administrators and personnel have a “responsibility and an ethical requirement to stop anti-gay abuse” (p. 365). To overcome the heterosexism that has dominated debates related to QIY, supportive parents, community members, and local and national advocacy groups must demand more from educators.

Moreover, Macgillivray (2004) points out that to overcome barriers and opposition, it is important that LGBT-supportive community groups advocate on
behalf of queer and questioning students as this has been effective in facilitating supportive policies in many schools. Finally:

Without a clear policy and top-down support to enforce it there is little or no incentive for principals and teachers . . . to address anti-gay peer harassment . . . furthermore, [they] have good reason to fear morally conservative parent groups whose tactics often jeopardize their job security (Macgillivray, 2004, p. 365).

Lorde (1988) states, “Just as racist stereotypes are the problem of white people who believe them, so also are homophobic stereotypes the problem of the heterosexuals who believe them. In other words, those stereotypes are yours to solve, not mine” (p. 279). With the support of heterosexual administrators, teachers, and community members who understand that heterosexism is negatively affecting QIY schools can be a safe place where all youth excel.

While the actions and words that stem from heterosexism negatively affect the queer community, those outside the community are the ones who ultimately need to own their prejudice and understand the negative effect that it has on others. Just as a teacher cannot force a student to understand a lesson, neither can the queer community will into existence understanding and compassion on the part of heterosexist individuals. Educators must teach support for and pride in the contributions of the queer community early. To take root, messages of inclusion must also be reinforced more frequently to diminish the heterosexism that permeates society.
Schools have the ability to be safe places for all students to learn, although they have not been meeting that standard when it comes to queer students. Educators lack training and administrators fail to adopt policies to resolve issues associated with bullying, isolation, and how to communicate support for QIY. Research has been done to determine how these matters can be resolved and what has limited progress in the past. Unfortunately, until the knowledge of educators is increased and policies are adopted and enforced by schools, QIY will have different educational experiences than their heterosexual peers.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Study Design and Data Collection

An in-depth study into the lives of a specific population makes it possible to shed light on “the mechanisms of social processes, and to comprehend and explain why both actors and processes are as they are” (Vidich & Lyman, 1998, p. 42).

Therefore, qualitative research was an ideal methodology to examine the lives of QIY. This study utilizes qualitative feminist research methodology. Feminist methodology rethinks three pillars of research: what deserves study, who may do the studying, and how the data is interpreted. Feminist methods developed from concerns stemming from a lack of women in various spheres of influence and power such as economics, politics, and the scientific community (Olsen, 1998, p. 302). Breaking down the barriers to topics available for research leads to a shift in understanding of who may participate in research. This deconstruction resulted in asking “the fundamental question of who can be a knower” (Olsen, 1998, p. 302). The status as knowers relates to researchers as experts in their fields of research. Knowers may also be research participants as experts in their own lives and the experiences related to the research in which they are participants.

Once the research questions and the participants were addressed, feminist researchers began problematizing the frameworks that had previously been established to interpret the data. The methods used in the interpretation of data based on the experiences and preconceived philosophies of male researchers were increasingly
unable to answer research questions related to women (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). As feminists began problematizing the preconceived norms of white middle-class American women, broader questions were asked, and new knowers were identified, resulting in data less filtered through the lens of privilege.

Despite this methodology being appropriate for the research question and the way that research subjects participated, there are some notable drawbacks to using qualitative feminist methods. The first challenge for qualitative research is bias. It has been argued that while uncovering deep seated views central to the issues being examined the researcher is not able to overcome sufficiently behavior detrimental to the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The second, but perhaps the greater, challenge to qualitative feminist research is that its validity will be challenged. This concern stems from the understanding that the questions examined are frequently challenging to generally-accepted social norms that many in academia may prefer went unexamined.

The survey questions were designed to understand the level of support that respondents believed they received while in high school, to understand the ways in which the respondents believed they were not supported, and what they believed could have improved their high school experiences. The questions were developed with the guidance of Dr. Lilly, Associate Chair of Teacher Education at California State University Sacramento. As recommended by Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2006), to test for comprehension and deficiencies the survey was distributed to a pilot study of 15 queer-identified adults who were not eligible to participate in the study as a result of being over the age of 20 years old prior to their participation in this study. The test
group was instructed to examine the survey, giving specific attention to the language used and question construction. They were asked to make note of any issues they found that might be problematic and were asked to provide comments to the researcher. Several thoughtful suggestions were made, and the survey was adjusted to take the feedback into consideration. The survey distribution method was developed utilizing lessons learned from a study conducted by Andrews, Nonnecke, and Preece (2003). These lessons include the increase in attrition rates associated with questions being arranged in tables, inconsistently formatted, and when responses to questions are required rather than optional. To reduce attrition, the questions were not formatted in table, were formatted in the same manner, and each participant was advised that all responses were optional.

Once the survey was finalized it was distributed to participants identified through social groups at a local LGBT Community Center, local events and public venues, and through social media outlets. The distribution method was email that included a single attachment including both the consent to participate (see Appendix A) and the questionnaire (see Appendix B). An email was sent directly to participants, they emailed their responses back, and they were encouraged to forward the survey on to other individuals who met the participant criteria.

The responses were analyzed thematically. Thematic analysis is a search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon (Daly et al., 1997). According to Boyatzis (1998), the process of paraphrasing or summarizing each piece of data enters information “into your unconscious, as well as consciously
processing the information” (p. 45). This process involves reading, listening to, and summarizing the raw data. This technique was utilized as a first step for analyzing the data. Inductive coding identified important statements and once patterns developed within the data themes were identified. Key statements made by each participant were logged; once a particular comment was discovered in at least four responses it was identified as a theme. Four responses represent 25% of the participants.

Research Questions

The following questions were explored:

1. Do QIY believe they are supported in high school?
2. What have been the academic achievements of QIY?

Research Instruments

According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998), qualitative research exists to study subjects in as natural a setting as possible and to interpret the information in terms of what it meant to the participant (p. 3). For that reason this research utilizes a survey of open-ended questions disseminated through email. This method of distribution was selected for several reasons. Participants are able to take their time with their responses and not feel rushed. Because they can choose to do this alone, there is less chance of them holding information back due to a fear of being judged by peers or bystanders for their responses. Finally, handwriting is frequently difficult to read. Typed and emailed responses do not present the same challenges and allow for a more accurate analysis. Open-ended questions were asked for two reasons: to reduce the likelihood of imbuing the questions with bias and to give the subjects the greatest
opportunity to share the experiences they felt were most important. Furthermore, in my experience, youth who have recently left high school are anxious to talk about their experiences and to tell the stories that made up their experience. This survey allowed the researcher to capture their experience in a way that is natural. While this survey would take more time to complete than one comprised of likert scales would have, the depth of the information that was reported allowed the researcher to construct a more complete and detailed picture of the experiences and feelings of those youth who participated.

Participants

This research includes 16 individuals who chose or were assigned pseudonyms for the purpose of this study. Each of them identify as queer, are between 18 and 20 years of age, and have had the opportunity to graduate from high school. Individuals who were too old, too young, or who had not yet had the opportunity to graduate from high school were not included in the sample. These parameters were selected for several reasons. Parental consent was not required because the participants were all 18 years of age or older. If parental consent had been required, participants would have been limited to those youth who were out to their parents. Youth who had left high school were selected so that the totality of their high school experiences could be evaluated and so that high school access and approval were not required. An assumption was that only schools that were supportive would have approved this type of research being conducted on a high school campus. Participants were identified at social support groups at a local LGBT Resource Center, at public events and venues,
and through contact on social media sites. Although individuals were contacted in person or through social media, the consent form and survey were distributed to participants and returned to the researcher by email.

Table 1

*Research Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patty</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Pansexual Genderqueer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Bisexual Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celeste</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Pansexual Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Queer Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tate</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Queer Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Queer Transman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clyde</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Straight Transman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chu</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Bisexual Man</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Setting

Between the fall of 2010 and the spring of 2013, the research sample was gathered through outreach to social and support groups for queers in a northern California city, and through postings on social media sites. The researcher attended social groups at the local LGBT Community Center. The researcher sent surveys to the eight members who were interested, and received no responses. The researcher posted a request for participants on Facebook and provided an email where interested youth could respond. Several individuals contacted the researcher and reposted the request for participants. Through this outreach the researcher received nine responses from eligible participants. The researcher also met individuals in public venues such as coffee shops and local poetry events who after hearing about the study asked to participate. The researcher received seven responses though this public outreach. The greatest challenge in receiving responses was the follow-through of interested individuals returning the survey. When the researcher asked for participants, many more individuals requested information then returned the questionnaire.

Procedures

Participants for this research were acquired through snowball research methods between June of 2010 and January of 2013. “Snowball sampling is often used because the population under investigation is ‘hidden’ either due to low numbers of potential participants or the sensitivity of the topic” (Browne, 2005, p. 47). No approval was necessary to post requests for research participants on social networking sites. To access the social support groups, the researcher contacted the facilitators and was
granted access to the group. In the social support group and when posting on Facebook, the researcher made a self-introduction, and then introduced the research.

The page preceding the survey was a one-page consent to participate. Not all questions needed to be answered for individuals to participate. Each participant was advised that if they had any questions or concerns, the researcher or advisor could be contacted. Each participant that returned a survey agreed to the terms and consented to participate. The researcher kept the responses and no other persons have access to this information.

Individuals were given the opportunity to ask questions, and were provided the researcher’s contact information so that the individuals who were interested in participating could contact the researcher. The researcher confirmed with each participant that they met the sample criteria and answered any questions they had. Interested individuals were sent the consent form and survey via email, and both were filled out to the extent to which the participant was comfortable. Once a volunteer participated and completed the process, they were encouraged to have members within their social networks participate by forwarding the researcher’s contact information, or emailing the consent form and survey directly. There were no incentives offered for participation in this research.

**Summary**

Employing qualitative survey research methods, the researcher aimed to understand the experiences of QIY in high schools over the last several years. The goal of this study is to understand the support QIY received and desired while in high
school and their educational achievements. These objectives were accomplished by compiling the reflections of queer adults through the use of a survey distributed by email. Participants were gathered through snowball sampling initiated through local social support groups, social media websites and public spaces such as coffee shops.
Chapter 4

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Survey Results

The 16 individuals who participated in this study were advised that they were not required to answer all of the questions on the survey. The information that was provided to the researcher was analyzed utilizing thematic analysis. A grid was constructed as themes emerged, then tallies were taken. The surveys were examined in their totality, rather than analyzing individual questions. If a participant mentioned that they heard homophobic language in question four, this would be grouped together with another student that mentioned hearing homophobic language in response to question six. Furthermore, if a comment was made in two different questions, it was only counted once. Examining the surveys as a whole, rather than comparing responses to individual questions, allowed the researcher to establish a more accurate picture of the respondents’ individual experiences.

The themes that emerged from the survey include: heterosexism, coming out or not, negative consequences, silence as communication, supportive educators, positive policies or best practices, and barriers to positive policy change. Additionally, notable findings were identified when two responses included comments about experiences that were not mentioned frequently enough to meet the threshold of themes. The notable findings of this study are gender nonconformity and hostile policies.
Question #1: Is there any demographic information you would like to share (age, ethnicity, gender or gender identity, sexual orientation or preferences, etc.)?

The geographical locations of individuals varied greatly. Six individuals identified as California residents, one was from New York, one came from North Dakota, and one survey came from West Virginia. The remainder of the respondents did not include this information in their response.

Figure 1 identifies the age of the participants at the time they submitted their surveys. All participants provided this information. Surveys received in which this information was not provided were not utilized in this research because the age of the participant may have fallen outside of the parameters that were established for the study. This was the only information that was required for inclusion in the study. Of the respondents three or 18% were 18 years old, another three respondents were 19 years old, and 10 respondents, representing 62% of participants, were 20 years old.

![Figure 1. Age of Participants at the Time of the Study.](image)

Figure 2 groups participants by the sexual orientation identified on their survey response. All respondents elected to provide this information. Eight participants
identified as gay or lesbian, representing homosexual identities; these participants account for 50% of respondents. Three, or 18%, of the respondents identified their sexual orientation as queer. One participant identified as straight. Two participants identified as bisexual and two additional participants identified as pansexual; these two categories each represent 12% of responses.

**Figure 2. Sexual Orientation Given by Participants.**

Figure 3 groups participants by their gender identity. Of the respondents five identified as women, representing 31% of the participants. Eight individuals, representing 50% of the participants, identified as men. Finally, three individuals or 18% of participants identified as transgender or genderqueer.

**Figure 3. Gender Identity as Described by Participants.**
Question #2: In what ways were you open about your gender expression and/or sexuality in high school?

Figure 4 groups participants based on their status as closeted or out during any of their time in high school. Some respondents entered high school closeted but came out before leaving high school; in these cases the participants were included in the category out in high school if they were out to all students and faculty or in the category out to a few people if at any time in high school they came out only to a select number of peers or faculty. Nine, 56%, participants were out to the general population of their high schools at some point during their high school career. Four, 25%, participants were out at some point in high school to a few individuals but were never out to the general population. Of the participants 3, or 18%, were never out to anyone in their high school.

Figure 4. Participants’ Status as Out or Closeted while in High School.
Question #3: Please share any positive or supportive interactions with peers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

Question #4: Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with peers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

Figure 5 shows the number of individuals that had experiences with peers that they identified as positive and experiences they identified as negative. Fifteen individuals, 93% of respondents, identified negative peer experiences; only one respondent did not identify negative peer experiences. Of the 16 respondents, 13 or 81%, identified positive peer experiences and three were unable to identify any positive peer experiences.

*Figure 5. Respondents Who Identified Positive and Negative Experiences with Peers.*
Question #5: Please share any positive or supportive interactions with teachers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity. Question #6: Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with teachers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

Figure 6 breaks down the experiences of the participants based on their reported positive and negative experiences with teachers. Six of the respondents, 37%, reported negative teacher experiences, one respondent had no negative experiences with teachers, and nine participants, 56%, did not provide any information related to negative teacher experiences. Of the respondents, 13, or 81% of participants, reported positive experiences with at least one teacher. Two participants, 12%, indicated that they had no positive experiences with teachers. Finally one response provided no information about positive experiences with teachers.

Figure 6. Respondents Who Identified Positive and Negative Experiences with Teachers.
Question #7: Please share any positive or supportive interactions with other faculty (principals, counselors, etc.) you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

Question #8: Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with other faculty (principals, counselors, etc.) you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

Figure 7 shows the number of individuals that had experiences with administrators that they identified as positive and experiences they identified as negative. Of the 16 participants, 5, or 31% of respondents, identified negative experiences with administrators, four respondents, 25%, did not identify negative experiences with administrators. Seven respondents or 43%, did not provide any information about negative experiences with administrators. Seven participants, 43%, identified positive experiences with administrators. Two respondents, 12%, stated that they had no positive experiences with administrators, and seven, 43%, did not provide information about positive experiences with administrators.
Question #9: Did you ever feel unsafe at school? If yes why did you feel unsafe, how frequently did this occur, and how did you cope with this feeling?

Figure 8 represents the experiences of feeling safe and feeling unsafe reported by respondents. All participants provided an answer to Question 9 on the survey, and the experiences were divided and established as mutually exclusive. If a participant reported even one occasion during which they felt unsafe in school they were included in the category of having felt unsafe and excluded from the category of having felt safe in school. Based on the information provided on the survey, nine respondents, representing 56% of participants, reported feeling safe in school. Conversely seven respondents, representing 44% of participants, reported feeling unsafe in school.
Figure 8. Participants Who Reported Feeling Safe or Unsafe in School.

**Question #10: Did you graduate from high school? If yes, did you graduate on time?**

Figure 9 represents the graduation experiences of each of the survey participants. All participants indicated whether they graduated on time, late, or whether they did not graduate from high school. Thirteen respondents, representing 81% of participants, graduated from high school on time. One of the participants graduated from high school late. Finally, two participants, 12% of respondents, did not graduate from high school.
Thematic Experiences of Respondents

Heterosexism: 5 out of 16 Respondents

Heterosexism was a common theme among responses. Lee explains that the school administration assumed students were straight. Adam’s experience with heterosexism was rooted in his peers “homophobic language and jokes,” which encouraged him to stay in the closet. Adam went on to state that there was an “[implicit] threat of at least emotional and social violence” and that he “limited social interactions to ensure safety.” Chu was convinced that “kids are always gonna be rude and discriminate. No matter how many [assemblies] they have about being tolerant and stuff, the kids will ultimately do what they want.” Mark believes that the intolerance exhibited by his peers “comes from the [youths] parents… so they do it to fellow school mates.” Chu said “I wasn’t open about being gay until my Senior year. And even then, I didn’t do anything ‘gay’.” Tate expressed a belief that mild
heterosexism is see as a positive experience Tate said “some believes to each is one own.”

**Coming Out or Not: 16 out of 16 Respondents**

A quarter of respondents stated that they were only out to a few people while in high school; another quarter did not come out to anyone until their senior year. Of the respondents that did come out, 12% experienced being outted (when a queer’s identity is shared with other people without permission). For various reasons 12% of respondents chose to remain closeted to everyone but themselves while in high school.

Whether or not a QIY came out to anyone at some point in high school, some experiences were shared. Homophobic language was mentioned as a reality of high school by 44% of respondents. Additionally, 31% responded that peers bullied them. Unfortunately, 31% and 12% of the respondents, respectively, reported experiencing or genuinely fearing physical assaults while in high school. Tate was “gay [bashed] coming home from a football game” and Clyde “felt unsafe at school … always feared that bullying would turn into something physical.”

**Negative Consequences: 10 out of 16 Respondents**

Many QIY are cautious about sharing their identity with others because they fear the possible repercussions. Some of the consequences, including outing, bullying, and assaults, were discussed above; but there are other consequences mentioned less frequently by respondents. One fear is the loss of friends; this occurred for two respondents. John lost friends because they “decided that they couldn’t be [his] friend
anymore because [he] was gay.” Rebecca experienced friends “heading for the hills” but was ultimately able to find support from other gay and lesbian students.

Fear of peers, teachers, and administration motivated some respondents to make choices that negatively impacted their academic success. Two examples are Rebecca and Michael. Rebecca said, “I left public school for home school at the end of my Junior year” but also admitted that she never graduated because she was missing so many credits due to “skipping when homophobic people were en mass.” Michael’s administration was very unsupportive and all of his “interactions with the Board of Education and faculty [were] negative.” Ultimately he graduated on time, as he put it, “thanks to attorneys and my parents for standing up against the school.” Michael was unlike his QIY peers, “mostly all queer students in [high school] had dropped out.”

Less extreme concerns may include the inability to appreciate the personal benefits of education. Chu, who was 20 years old at the time of his participation, and had experienced verbal bullying, “technically had the [third] highest overall GPA” and he chose not to go to college because, as he says, “I didn’t, and still don’t, know what I would go for… I’d rather not go into debt for nothing.”

For some of the participants, the fear and anxiety caused by their experiences in high school led to isolation and suicidal thoughts or attempts. Clyde says, “I coped with these feelings mostly by myself and I tried really hard to stay clear of the area within the high school that made me uncomfortable.” Rebecca’s experience may be the worst nightmare of QIY. She said, “school was hell with florescent lighting. No
one’s ever understood… I did attempt to take my life several times. I was completely isolated and depressed.”

**Silence as Communication: 7 out of 16 Respondents**

Some educators encourage the development and implementation of positive policies because they have a desire to support all students. In the experience of many participants there was no written policy enforced to encourage the support of QIY; because of this lack of policy members of the school community were able to decide for themselves if, when, and how they would show support for QIY. Participants picked up on nonverbal communication throughout their time in high school. Support was generally explicit. Apathy, a desire not to deal with topics related to gender and sexuality, and not supporting GSAs were regularly not addressed or explained. Adam’s experience with silent communication included the understanding that his ‘school would have stopped each incident of bullying but there was no policy to handle queer bullying.” Ethan says that he “didn’t experience any” positive experiences with teachers, and “heard stories of homophobic teachers.”

Sometimes the administration communicates with students. Lee’s school discussed safe sex, but only for heterosexuals. The most frequently mentioned way that silent communication affected the experience of the participants was their perception that the school was not supportive of the creation of a GSA. According to Clyde his “school attempted to have a GSA although it wasn’t too successful because the school wasn’t extremely supportive of it.” Elizabeth’s school was not allowed to have a GSA.
Supportive Educators: 4 out of 16 Respondents

Some of the participants experienced educators that were committed to actively supporting their queer students and creating a safer, more supportive high school experience. Tate’s “theater teacher … sent anyone who used ‘fag’ in a negative way to the office.” Furthermore, her Principal supported the effort to prevent the use of “gay slanders.” Christian also had teachers who understood how much support students needed even if administrators did not. He had “two teachers that ran an ‘underground’ [GSA].”

Unfortunately, some educators do not understand either how much their support is needed or how to offer that support. Elizabeth was bullied in classes because she came out. She says that the bullying “wasn’t really handled well” and when she went to the Assistant Principal she was yelled at for gossiping.

Positive Policies and Best Practices: 15 out of 16 Respondents

The respondents had several thoughts about the ways that their schools were or could have been more supportive of them as QIY. Some of these suggestions are general, some are about staff, faculty, and administration, and some relate to other students.

Of the participants 25% said that there should be strong policies to protect QIY that were enforced. Mark said that his school could have been more supportive if there were “harder penalties for people who harass LGBT youth. A slap on the wrist or ‘talk’ won’t work.” Similarly, Ethan said that his school would have been more supportive if there had been a “campaign against gay slurs.” And Lee would have
appreciated hearing about safe sex practices to protect all students not just opposite sex couples, and to have queers integrated into the curriculum.

Several respondents mentioned that training for teachers would be positive. Adam, Rebecca, and Elizabeth said that school could have shown more support if there was “Safe Zone” training for teachers. Adam and Jake both mentioned the importance of supportive and knowledgeable counselors. Nearly half of the respondents mentioned the positive impact that a supportive teacher had or could have had on their experience. Clyde said, “the teacher that ran the GSA was very welcoming.” One of Chu’s teachers “was quite supportive and told [him] about how she was friends with gay people and that it wasn’t anything to be ashamed of.” Mark knew that his “teachers were there for [him]” if he was harassed by other students. Tyler was out to all his teachers, and they were supportive; his Freshman English teacher told him he “had a lot of courage to be out at such a young age.” The only positive comments that Rebecca made in her responses related to her choir teacher; she said “he didn’t care if I was bi, straight, red or blue as long as I showed up and sang my butt off in class.” He also let her use his classroom at lunch to “basically hide from the rest of the school.”

Several respondents also mentioned that they thought having queer teachers who were out was or would have been positive. Jake and Celeste mentioned that having queer teachers created a supportive environment. Chu, who did not have role models in school, said that one way the school could have been more supportive would have been to “hire a GAY TEACHER … maybe more kids will be able to come
out and not be too afraid if they have an example of a teacher to look up to.” John and Tate both mentioned positive experiences with administrators, the Assistant Principal and Principal respectively.

Some of the recommendations and positive comments that were made by participants included things that would directly and specifically support QIY. Several responses indicated that the use of stickers to identify safe staff would have been, or was, helpful while in high school. Two respondents thought that there should be resources on campus that students could access. Tate said, “schools should advertise local gay community centers” she thought that this would “help kids find support.” Lee thought that having “resources available or a center” would have shown greater support for QIY. Christian’s school participated in the awareness event “day of silence” to highlight the struggle that QIY face when they feel they would not be safe if they came out; Tate would have appreciated if her school would have participated. Jake’s school displayed “visible markers of the queer community (Flags)” and this showed Jake that his school was supportive.

Of the respondents, 69% mentioned GSAs as supportive. Seven participants attended schools that had GSAs; Mark said, “we had a GSA … which is a safe place for the students to be open about who they are.” Nearly all of the responses indicating a GSA mentioned it as a way they knew that their school supported QIY. Four participants mentioned that they wished their school had allowed them to have a GSA, and four of these responses included this comment as part of their answer to the question about how their school could have been more supportive.
Barriers to Positive Policy Changes: 8 out of 16 Respondents

The respondents mentioned several reasons they thought that their schools were not more supportive; some of these things are changeable and some are less flexible. Patty did not believe that her school could have been any more supportive “because the overwhelming message of [the] town was disgust.” Elizabeth’s experiences included an out gay teacher who “wrote a book about a lesbian teacher.” There was “outrage from the parents [who] accused her of being an unfit teacher.” Some of the respondents attended parochial schools and the flexibility of teachers and staff may have been limited by the doctrine of the church. Christian went to a Catholic high school so he does not know “what they could have done to be more supportive.” Jake attended a Catholic high school as well and, while his time there began as supportive, the “higher officials of the Church changed the nature of the campus while putting new policies in place.” Now he says “it is a very different place.”

While the teaching staff is the one element of campus life that might be easily influenced, until that happens teachers can be a significant barrier to positive high school experiences for QIY. Lee’s teacher, who showed preference for students who conformed to his expectations of gender, is one example. Michael did not have anything positive to say about any of his teachers, and in fact, thought, “most of the teachers were very judgmental.” Rebecca reported overhearing teachers using homophobic language about her, and not intervening in bullying of QIY until a classmate was beaten in the hallway.
Considering the variety of areas across the country and the variety of educational settings that were represented by the participants, there were considerable experiences and desires shared by the respondents. The thematic experiences of the respondents’ high school experiences included heterosexism, coming out or not, negative consequences, silence as communication, positive policies or best practices, and barriers to positive policy change. Many respondents had both positive and negative experiences with peers, teachers, and administrators, but it is unfortunate that any student would feel unsafe or unsupported in school.

**Notable Findings**

The criterion used to establish notable findings was the identifying two surveys with similar comments. The researcher determined that although these experiences did not meet the threshold of themes, the responses should be included in the analysis. Two subject areas met the criteria: gender nonconforming behavior and hostile policies.

**Gender Nonconforming Behavior: 2 out of 16 Respondents**

Some QIY who did not conform to expectations of their assigned gender reported that their time in high school included experiences that pressured them to obey social conventions rather than express their gender identity honestly.

Clyde, who now identifies as a heterosexual transman, in high school “identified as a lesbian, but was always very masculine.” He said “often times I got mistaken for a boy whether I [was] on campus or at other schools playing sports.” Even though he said that, “throughout high school I was made fun of because of the
way I dress. I always had short hair and wore men’s clothing. These incidences made me really uncomfortable throughout high school, so I didn’t have many friends.” He continued to express masculine gender identity because he was more comfortable that way. It was not until he began working to restart the school’s GSA that he met peers who he “could [relate] to which in turn made [him] more comfortable and feeling like [he] had a home on campus; a safe place.”

Lee’s self-described identity is “female/intersex genderqueer same-sex/pan tendencies” an identity that indicates Lee expresses a gender that is neither more feminine nor more masculine though likely was born female and is attracted to individuals who may or may not share the same-sex regardless of their gender identity or expression. Because of Lee’s gender identity, and because no pronoun was specified in the survey, they will be used as a pronoun in place of he or she. Lee was “harassed when gender strayed too much, felt pressure to present as femme” and was told that they “didn’t look gay” and “wasn’t gay before.” Lee also indicated that one male teacher in particular “showed preference for appropriately gendered students.” Lee felt pressure from peers and authority figures. According to Lee “jocks had leeway with expressed gender” and students were “praised when gender was ‘appropriate’.”

**Hostile Policies: 2 out of 16 Respondents**

Schools have many policies and procedures; they are intended to support individuals at the school and keep them safe. Unfortunately, some of the policies that
the research participants encountered were not supportive and created situations that prevented them from having the same access to services as other students.

Several respondents mentioned attending dances at their high schools. Some of the respondents were able to bring same-sex dates to their dances; some students were supportive of this and some were not, but same-sex students were allowed to attend as a couple. Rebecca and her girlfriend had to pretend that they were just friends to be able to attend because by that time Rebecca had begun being home schooled, and would not be allowed to attend on her own or as part of a same-sex couple.

Unfortunately, policies that participants ran into conflict with did not end at dance attendance. Elizabeth said that she needed to get her “parents permission to see a counselor.” In Elizabeth’s case this meant that if she wanted to utilize the school counselor as a resource she first had to come out to her parents, something that she might not have been prepared to do. Ultimately she did tell her parents who “weren’t supportive and thought that if [she] hung out with other kids and didn’t ‘talk about it’ it would go away.” She said, “it would have been nice not to need their permission.”

Although the experience of respondents discussing obstacles in their education because of gender nonconforming identities and specific hostile policies were not themes, most responses provide insight into the concerns of queer students and the specific shortcomings of their high school experiences. The expectation is not that schools support most of their students or even most of the queer students. Schools should be supportive and encourage all students to be themselves, and provide a place where students can thrive while exploring their identities. The researcher would have
been remiss to not acknowledge these less frequent experiences and would have been as non-supportive as the educators that overlooked the importance of encouraging their queer students in the first place.

**Summary**

Because of a shared identity, many of the respondents had similar experiences while in high school. Bullying, harassment, and unsupportive teachers affected the experiences of many respondents. Fortunately, there were also several respondents who were able to identify and turn to supportive teachers and administrators. There is no justification for the continued lack of support experienced by QIY, although there are several explanations. Experiencing support from educators should be the rule, rather than the exception, for all students, regardless of their sexuality and gender identity.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND REFLECTIONS

Introduction

This study documented the experiences of QIY in high school including the support they received and their educational achievements. Participants hailed from across the United States, attended public, private, and home schools, and varied in ethnic and religious backgrounds. This study sought to increase the body of knowledge related to the support experienced or desired among queer high school students. Additionally this study examined the possible correlation between support of QIY and educational achievement. Scholarship questioning queer adults about their educational experiences makes this study unique.

Discussion

Heterosexism: 5 out of 16 Respondents

Participants responded to several research questions related to their experiences with heterosexism in their high schools. The relevant questions include:

2. In what ways were you open about your gender expression and/ or sexuality in high school?

4. Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with peers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.
6. Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with teachers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

8. Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with other faculty (principals, counselors, etc.) you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

9. Did you ever feel unsafe at school? If yes why did you feel unsafe, how frequently did this occur, and how did you cope with this feeling?

13. What if anything so you think your high school could have done to be more supportive of queer students?

The experiences of many respondents suggest that heterosexism existed throughout their high school experiences and manifested in several ways. For Chu, Adam, and Tate, peers were a common source of heterosexist language and attitudes. Their experiences follow the pattern that has been established through previous research (CDC, 2011; Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2012). Heterosexism may be present not only throughout the school hierarchy, but outside the school environment as well (Kitzinger, 2005; Kosciw et al., 2012; Nielsen et al., 2000; Weeks, 1985). Unfortunately, according to the responses collected for this research, it continues to be a common experience in high schools. Chu believed that heterosexism is learned at home, and Jake experienced the Catholic Church influencing the policies at his parochial high school.
Respondents may have struggled with a negative view of queer individuals and self because of societal pressures to conform to gender expectations, and because they were raised in the same society that supports heterosexism (Butler, 1997; Kitzinger, 2005; Nielsen et al., 2000; Weeks, 1985). Chu believes that there are actions that are gay, but states that he did not do any of those things even after he came out. While the researcher does not know what particular actions he considers gay, he may have been referring to it is possible that stereotypes, conveyed through society, may have led him to believe that queers dress a particular way, listen to specific music, or only read queer literature, although doing these things does not make one queer nor does abstaining from these behaviors exclude someone from a queer identity. The lessons of heterosexism that children learn from their parents or from the stereotypes of queer individuals portrayed in popular culture can be strong enough to negatively influence QIY; this is known as internalized homophobia, and it is possible that this is one of Chu’s experiences (Kosciw et al., 2012).

For many QIY heterosexism is expected (CDC, 2011; Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2012). The attitude of tolerance that was experienced by Tate, although perceived as supportive, actually expresses judgment. When heterosexism was conveyed as tolerance, it was seen as positive because things could have been worse for her as a result of societal pressures (Rienzo et al., 2006). Even if tolerance is better than the alternative, it conveys the ability to overcome one’s disagreement with a situation and remain civil (Tolerance, n.d.). This behavior may be safer than the violence that can and often times is experienced. Consequently, tolerance was such a
relief to Tate that she listed it as a positive response to Question #3: Please share any positive or supportive interactions with peers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

For many of the respondents, being supported and encouraged to be true to their own identity may have seemed impossible. Several responses indicated a belief that intolerance was to be expected such as “kids are always gonna be rude and discriminate.” While generally in society this may be the case, school should provide a reprieve from such heterosexism.

**Coming Out or Not: 16 out of 16 Respondents**

The questions that were utilized to develop this theme include:

2. In what ways were you open about your gender expression and/or sexuality in high school?

3. Please share any positive or supportive interactions with peers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

4. Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with peers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

Once QIY come out to themselves and admit that they do not identify as heterosexual or with either the sex or gender they were assigned at birth, they begin deciding who they want to share that information with, when to tell others, and how to broach the subject (Reis & Saewyc, 1999). Remaining in the closet is seen as safe,
while there are risks associated with coming out (Patrick et al., 2013; Pearson et al., 2007).

For those that question their sexual orientation, gender expression, or identity, there are decisions that must be made; first, whether they should tell anyone, and second, if so, whom should they tell (Ohio University LGBT Center, 2009). Because the respondents were aware of their queer identities in high school, these decisions needed to be addressed at that time. This weighing of options is a process that balances likely negative consequences with the possibility of gaining supportive allies; furthermore this is a process that is undertaken by a projected 9% of high school students (Reis & Saewyc, 1999; Wyss, 2004). Regardless of their status as out or closeted, it is the belief of the researcher that the QIY who participated in this study based their decisions whether to come out on what they believed was best for them.

The risks associated with coming out include loss of friends, bullying, and even violence (Daley et al., 2007; Greytak et al., 2009; Solomon, 2002; Wyss, 2004). Because of these risks, four out of 16 participants were only out to a few people while in high school and four out of 16 participants did not come out until their senior year of high school. Because of their fear of negative repercussions, three of the participants never came out to anyone while they were in high school. Students should not need to hide their true identities in order to remain safe, but often that is seen as the only choice.
Negative Consequences: 10 out of 16 Respondents

The questions that contributed to the development of this theme include:

2. In what ways were you open about your gender expression and/or sexuality in high school?

3. Please share any positive or supportive interactions with peers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

4. Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with peers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

5. Please share any positive or supportive interactions with teachers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

6. Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with teachers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

7. Please share any positive or supportive interactions with other faculty (principals, counselors, etc.) you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

8. Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with other faculty (principals, counselors, etc.) you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.
9. Did you ever feel unsafe at school? If yes, why did you feel unsafe, how frequently did this occur, and how did you cope with this feeling?

10. Did you graduate from high school? If yes, did you graduate on time?

Fear of negative consequences is a motivation for many QIY, and this fear keeps them from coming out and risking their friends, their safety, and their health (Reis & Saewyc, 1999; Wyss, 2004). These risks were not theoretical to the participants of this study: two participants lost friends when they came out, seven respondents felt unsafe at school, and Rebecca attempted suicide on several occasions as a result of the isolation and depression she experienced. Because of the hostility that was experienced in schools as well as the pervasiveness of bullying (Daley et al., 2007; Patrick et al., 2013; Solomon, 2002) and lack of teacher interventions (Wyss, 2004) queer youth, like Rebecca and Celeste who were both home schooled and never graduated, are more likely than heterosexual students to leave high school before graduating (Reis & Saewyc, 1999). QIY across the country have negative experiences; they are bullied and prevented from experiencing support in their schools because of their queer identities (Butler, 2006; Daley et al., 2007; Kosciw et al., 2012; Patrick et al., 2013; Solomon, 2002). Tate was attacked after a football game, Clyde felt unsafe at school, seven participants mentioned homophobic language, and five participants were bullied. Schools should be safe havens for all students, not places where they fear losing the support of others because of their identities.
Silence as Communication: 7 out of 16 Respondents

The following questions contributed to the development of this theme:

5. Please share any positive or supportive interactions with teachers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

6. Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with teachers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

7. Please share any positive or supportive interactions with other faculty (principals, counselors, etc.) you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

8. Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with other faculty (principals, counselors, etc.) you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

9. Did you ever feel unsafe at school? If yes why did you feel unsafe, how frequently did this occur, and how did you cope with this feeling?

10. Did you graduate from high school? If yes did you graduate on time?

12. What if anything did your high school do to support queer students?

13. What if anything so you think your high school could have done to be more supportive of queer students?

14. Do you have any other thoughts on these issues?
Silent communication is pervasive throughout schools and can manifest through interactions with peers, teachers, and administrators (Esposito & Baez, 2008). The decision not to address concerns of queer students relegate their identities to the shadow of taboo, making the challenges of high school an even more isolating time (Noddings, 2005). Furthermore, like Adam and Ethan, many QIY are unable to identify safe or supportive faculty in their high school, adding to the belief that their identities and perspectives are not worth discussing or even acknowledging (Koenig, 2008). Assumptions made by educators who believe that all students are straight likely influence the choice of both overt and hidden curricula, including the sex education Lee experienced which ignored queer relationships and reinforced queer identities as taboo and inappropriate (Esposito & Baez, 2008; Noddings, 2005). As in Ethan’s experience, allowing rumor and conjecture among the student population, rather than directly communicating support, indicates that few, if any, teachers in a school are committed to actively showing support for QIY. Silence regarding the issue of allowing a GSA also led Clyde to believe that his school was not supportive of the GSA, and by extension, QIY.

Supportive Educators: 4 out of 16 Respondents

The questions that assisted in the development of this theme include:

5. Please share any positive or supportive interactions with teachers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.
6. Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with teachers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

7. Please share any positive or supportive interactions with other faculty (principals, counselors, etc.) you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

8. Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with other faculty (principals, counselors, etc.) you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

12. What if anything did your high school do to support queer students?

13. What if anything so you think your high school could have done to be more supportive of queer students?

14. Do you have any other thoughts on these issues?

Educators bring their own biases to the classroom, like Lee’s teacher who praised gender ‘appropriate’ behavior. Often times these beliefs prevent them from providing the same educational experience to all of their students (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Many experiences of QIY are fraught with hostility; peers and educators alike relegate their identity to taboo. (Mayberry, 2006; Pace, 2004). Support from teachers can have a profound effect on the self-esteem of QIY (Hansen, 2007; Macgillivray, 2004; Mayberry, 2006; Vicars, 2006). It is for this reason that QIY notice and remember when educators are supportive of them. Tate’s choir teacher was the only faculty that supported her, and she wrote several sentences explaining all the ways he
did so. Mark and Tyler both shared their experiences with supportive teachers, and Elizabeth remembered the positive interactions she had with the school’s custodian. She wrote, “[her] daughter was a lesbian and she was very supportive. She didn’t treat me or my friends, or other LGBTQ people with anything but respect. She had a HRC equality sticker in her office and she openly talked about her daughter.” These supportive actions made quite an impression on Elizabeth, and were likely not challenging or time consuming for the custodian. Unfortunately, if educators are not interested in becoming a safe resource for QIY there is little that can be done to positively affect the high school experience for their queer students.

Positive Policies and Best Practices: 15 out of 16 Respondents

The following questions were utilized in the development of this theme:

5. Please share any positive or supportive interactions with teachers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

6. Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with teachers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

7. Please share any positive or supportive interactions with other faculty (principals, counselors, etc.) you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.
8. Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with other faculty (principals, counselors, etc.) you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

9. Did you ever feel unsafe at school? If yes why did you feel unsafe, how frequently did this occur, and how did you cope with this feeling?

10. Did you graduate from high school? If yes did you graduate on time?

12. What if anything did your high school do to support queer students?

13. What if anything so you think your high school could have done to be more supportive of queer students?

14. Do you have any other thoughts on these issues?

Similar to the profound effect that supportive teachers can have on QIY, policies that support them can also be powerful (Hansen, 2007; Macgillivray, 2004; Mayberry, 2006; Pace, 2004; Vicars, 2006). Chief among the policies that QIY identify as supportive, and mentioned by 11 participants, is the availability of a QSA (Lee, 2002, Mayberry, 2006). The merits of spaces dedicated to QIY can be debated because although a separate space may be a safe place to explore queer identities, a separate space can further distinguish queer students as apart from their heterosexual peers (Mayberry, 2006). However, QIY do not appear to be concerned about being viewed as separate from their heterosexual peers and are likely to believe that the allowance of a GSA is a clear indicator that their school supports queer students (Lee, 2002; Mayberry, 2006). Although it may not be possible for all schools to allow a GSA because of outside influences, access to one is often greatly appreciated by QIY.
Mark identified the GSA as a safe place for students to be open, and four participants indicated that if their school had had a GSA they would have known that they were supported.

Practically this is not likely, but Chu would have appreciated an out queer teacher, and four participants indicated that having out teachers on campus was a positive experience. However, teachers do not need to be queer to be supportive of QIY. Five participants indicated that teachers and other staff should have more training about how to be allies to QIY. Seven respondents specifically mentioned using stickers to show support as an ally. Unfortunately, educators often do not have, or fail to take advantage of, training opportunities to learn how to support their queer students and to deepen their understanding of the impact that their support of QIY can have in the lives of their students (Greytak et al., 2013). Another five participants indicated that policies to protect QIY were necessary because heterosexist language was too pervasive and bullying was not being solved by lenient punishments or conversations about inappropriate behavior.

**Barriers to Positive Policy Changes: 8 out of 16 Respondents**

Several questions were utilized to develop this theme including:

6. Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with teachers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.
8. Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with other faculty (principals, counselors, etc.) you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

12. What if anything did your high school do to support queer students?

13. What if anything so you think your high school could have done to be more supportive of queer students?

When it comes to the development of positive policies, several barriers continue to exist including community pressure, educator ignorance, and religious influence (Macgillivray, 2004; Pace, 2004). Patty and Elizabeth lived in areas that were not supportive of QIY, and Jake attended a Catholic high school; according to the respondents these factors limited the responses available to the school when developing policies and addressing concerns. QIY are aware of these pressures and the challenges that these factors present to the development of clearly written and well-defined policies (Hansen, 2007). Michael believed that his teachers were judgmental, and he had nothing positive to say about any of his teachers, but while he was in high school he had no way to change that reality. Unfortunately, QIY are only too aware that their needs and desires may come second to the expectations of others, particularly to those in positions of authority, despite their fundamental right to be supported by their educators and the educational system.

**Gender Nonconforming Behavior: 2 out of 16 Respondents**

The first two survey questions provided the information that the researcher identified for this notable fining; the questions are:
1. Is there any demographic information you would like to share (age, ethnicity, gender or gender identity, sexual orientation or preferences, etc.)?

2. In what ways were you open about your gender expression and/or sexuality in high school?

Gender nonconforming students may account for up to 5% of youth, and many experience hostility because of their gender expression (Grant et al., 2011; Transgender Law and Policy Institute, 2010). Too often educators do not support students because of their gender identity (Grant et al., 2011). While the barriers to a supportive educational experience present unnecessary challenge to all QIY, queer youth who do not conform to gendered expectations of their birth sex face additional obstacles (Grant et al., 2011). One of Lee’s teachers specifically praised the gender behavior he decided was appropriate at the expense of all other gender expressions. The challenging of gender roles is seen as a challenge to society. Individuals, including educators, are not always able to accept that gender is simply a performance that can be adapted and changed by each individual (Butler, 2006). Unfortunately, QIY like Clyde, who was born female but dressed in masculine clothes, continue to feel uncomfortable in school because they are made fun of. Just as students should be supported regarding their sexual orientation they should also be supported to express their gender in the manner they choose.
Hostile Policies: 2 out of 16 Respondents

The final notable finding emerged from just one question:

8. Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with other faculty (principals, counselors, etc.) you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

There are several ways that a school environment can be hostile to queer students (Mayberry, 2006; Pace, 2004; Savage et al., 2004). Queer students should be able to experience high school in the same way as their heterosexual peers through access to the same opportunities such as counselors and dances (Pace, 2004; Savage et al., 2004). Unfortunately, this was not Rebecca’s experience when she wanted to attend a dance with her girlfriend or when Elizabeth wanted to talk to the school counselor about questioning her sexuality. Hostile policies are likely to continue to be a reality in the lives and experiences of QIY, particularly in educational settings. Only when training is provided to and embraced by all educators and administrators will there be a chance to alter this situation significantly.

The experiences of QIY are greatly influenced by the level of support received from their teachers and the nature of the policies that either protect or neglect them. QIY from across the country, from different socioeconomic statuses, and different religious and ethnic communities share common experiences because of their queer identities. Fear and harassment, coupled with a lack of support from educators, creates an environment that is not conducive to academic success and learning.
Teachers

As shown in this research, support from teachers is critical to the academic success of QIY, so the steps that they take may ultimately yield the greatest benefits. In general, teachers have control over their classrooms. Teachers can set rules and punishments for inappropriate behavior, they can open dialogues with their classes about why demeaning language contradicts a learning environment supportive of all pupils, and they can encourage students to maintain this standard for themselves. If teachers are motivated to do so, punishments designed to deter heterosexist language and behavior can be implemented. Even if the school administration will not participate in holding all students to the same standard, individual classrooms can become safe places to learn for all students because they know that at least one teacher is committed to supporting them. These actions are similar to those that many teachers may already take to prevent discrimination based on physical or mental disabilities, religion, national origin, or socioeconomic status. There is no reason that any student should fear their peers, especially when an authority figure should have their best interests in mind.

Administrators

High school administrators may support QIY by establishing consequences for using heterosexist language in the halls and at school functions. Administrators may have the authority to allow the creation of GSAs or other social groups to help queer and queer-supporting students establish a safe community of peers. Administrators may also have the authority to allow same-sex couples to attend school dances
together while continuing to impose the same code of behavior on them as is expected of heterosexual couples (appropriate dancing, public displays of affection, etc.). Additionally, they could offer training opportunities for interested staff to learn how to be better allies to their QIY students. While teachers tend to have the most impact, it is possible that administrative support for QIY may prompt more teachers to implement supportive classroom policies.

**Institutional Changes**

As discussed previously, there may be significant barriers (school boards, church affiliation, intolerant parents) to institutional changes, but for high schools and school districts that do not face these challenges, or that are able to overcome them, there are ways to show QIY that they are fully-supported members of the educational landscape. In addition to supporting all of the above possibilities, institutional changes could include a policy supporting tough penalties for bullying motivated by heterosexism. Districts could develop and implement sexual education curricula that are comprehensive and designed to protect all students. Training for educators to understand how to support QIY could be mandatory instead of optional. In addition, historical contributions of queers could be incorporated into the curricula. Integrating queers into curricula would be more impactful than a one-day assembly for the student population.

The responses to the questions posed in this research suggest that lack of support by teachers may be the chief constraint to success in high school by QIY. This research explains the steps that may be taken by individual teachers, by
individual administrators, and by districts and institutions to increase the support provided to QIY. Moreover, this research demonstrates that educators who are willing to take action to support QIY are likely to see graduation rates improve and an increase in matriculation to college.

**Conclusions**

The responses to the survey contain invaluable qualitative data that can be utilized by educators interested in understanding how to support QIY in their schools. The results of the survey indicate that the single greatest indicator of a supportive high school experience for QIY is the support of their teachers, and it appears that this support may lead to higher rates of graduation and college matriculation. The themes that emerged from this study provide guidance for those desiring to understand the experience of QIY.

QIY want to be supported in school, and they are more academically successful when this occurs. They remember the educators that were positive influences and they remember the teachers that were not supportive, especially those that allowed other students to bully and harass them for being different. Theoretically, educators want to make a difference in the lives of their students; they can do this by being vocally and visibly supportive of all students including QIY, and preventing or punishing heterosexism in their classrooms. QIY want to know that they are safe in school. Policies to address bullying, harassment, and intimidation based on actual or perceived gender identity and sexuality need to be created and enforced. All students
need to be aware of these policies, and their importance should be reiterated repeatedly. These policies should become part of the social landscape of school.

Queers need to be included in the visible and hidden curriculum in schools. The contributions of queers to art, literature, science, sex education should be inclusive of all sexualities, and their historical place in national and international history should be woven into lesson plans, readings, and lectures. Additionally, educators should allow students to communicate openly, but appropriately, about queer issues. Suppressing these topics needs to end so that all students know that queer identities are as valid as heterosexual identities. Such open communication will reduce the effects of tokenism that may result when a lesson in class touches upon a queer person.

QIY want a place in school where they know they are safe to be themselves. Ideally this is a place or time set aside for the discussion of identity that is open and utilized by a variety of students to prevent QIY from continuing to be set apart from their peers. However, even if this safety manifests just as group for QIY, that is a beginning to a more positive and supportive environment for the students who utilize it or simply appreciate having the option. QIY should be able to find resources at school to address questioning, coming out, and finding other resources. Additionally, QIY want to know that there are safe and supportive faculty to turn to if they need help or have questions, and want to be able to identify them.

This study has the ability to affect the lives and experience of QIY across the county. A better understanding of how schools can support all youth can lead to more
engaged, caring, and higher-achieving students. Judging from the enthusiasm shown in the responses from the research participants, QIY want to participate in creating the changes they believe to be necessary, and they have an understanding of the obstacles that will need to be overcome. Research like this is overdue. Although there is extensive scholarship on various shortcomings of schools in the service of QIY, and the consequences that can result in the lives of QIY (truancy, alcohol and drug use, suicide attempts), there is little research that provides a clear path telling educators what tangible steps they can take to improve the experience for the QIY in their schools.

**Limitations**

Several limitations affect the findings of this study, the greatest limitation being the small sample size. The number of participants was small even for a qualitative study. The survey was designed to limit the effects of attrition; however many individuals who requested the opportunity to participate in the study ultimately did not return the survey to the researcher. The distribution of the survey through email limited the participants to those with access to the Internet and a valid email address. This limitation likely prevented the participation of some youth. Additionally, the information provided to the researcher cannot be verified. Each respondent attended a different high school, and the schools were not contacted for confirmation regarding the information provided. Finally, although the researcher intended to follow up the surveys with interviews, this proved impossible. Several participants who agreed to a follow up interview failed to keep any of the appointments that were
set with the researcher, and many respondents indicated that they were not interested in being interviewed.

**Recommendations**

Given the implications of this research, there are additional analyses that should be completed to address several unresolved questions. The results of this study pose questions about the potential benefits of support from various influencers including educators, family, religious institutions, and extra curricular programs. Questions have also been raised by this study regarding the periods of personal development when various kinds of support for queers may be the most beneficial. Additional studies may also be needed to determine if demographic variations among QIY result in the need for support to be presented differently.

Additional scholarship may determine if support, or lack thereof, from family and/or community, affect QIY in ways similar to support received or not received from high schools. Other studies may also reveal if support from school counteracts any potentially destructive consequences caused by deficiencies in support received from other influencers. It would also be beneficial to determine which of these various influencers have the greatest impact on QIY, and if there are notable differences in the impact of support based on the stages of development at which it may be offered.

Studies on the long-term effects of support for QIY could shed light on the full ramifications of support or rejection of QIY during various stages of development. Considering the impact that may result based on the timing of support shown to QIY, further research should be conducted to determine when support may yield the greatest
positive consequences. Additional research needs to be done to determine if the results of this study are applicable to elementary and middle school students. Further study into the influences of educators could also allow teachers of various grade levels to understand what measures will have the greatest positive impact on their students. Results of research into grade-level appropriate support could assist in the development of new training curricula for teachers, administrators, and counselors to understand their roles in providing support to QIY.

Further research may discover if there are regional, socioeconomic, ethnic, or religious differences in the concerns of QIY. Given these potential variations, different ways of effecting positive change for each population of QIY could be determined. Additional research could also examine variations in the support needed for QIY based on how the youth identifies: gay, lesbian, transgender, etc. Based on any of the demographics listed above, QIY may need support earlier in life or more support from various influencers to counteract the negative messaging they may encounter.

There are many steps that will need to be taken and many individuals who will need to be educated about both the benefits of change and the ramifications of inaction, but there is no reason to delay any first steps that are possible. As additional research is being conducted to increase understanding of the nuances of how to provide the best support to QIY, schools should begin implementing the policies that have been laid out in this and past studies. Individual educators have the ability to implement changes in their classrooms immediately and begin improving the lives of QIY in their schools. Even with the best intentions though, it may be difficult for
teachers to follow through on assurances to support QIY if they do not know how to show support, or if they do not understand why it is so important to do so. Moreover, educators need to examine the ways in which they actively support QIY, and the ways in which they fail to do so. Furthermore, educators should self-reflect to identify where their shortcomings are rooted, and how they can be overcome.

Reflections

The decisions made by educators about if and how to support QIY have the ability to alter dramatically society’s attitudes about individual differences, personal identity, and the free expression of one’s self. If schools are intended to be supportive environments that help facilitate academic learning and personal development for all students, then the administration and teachers, at most schools, have the opportunity to bring this ideal to fruition for many students by addressing the needs of QIY. Those educators who are motivated to create more supportive learning environments for QIY may face many challenges. Obstacles may include, but are not limited to, overcoming a history of non-supportive policies and working against public opinion that may range from uncomfortable to violently heterosexist.

The motivations for conducting this research were twofold: to discover if queers believed they were supported in their high schools and what their educational achievements have been. These motivations assumed that students who feel supported in high school are more likely to graduate and ultimately more likely to go to college. The discoveries of the research identified what educators can do to support QIY.
At heart, educators want their students to succeed. This research presents several ways in which they can increase the academic achievements of their QIY students. This study is a positive first step in the endeavor to support QIY, encourage their academic success, and fully integrate them into the fabric of the educational and social landscape. It is the hope of the researcher that others will continue this work and make use of the lessons learned from the research participants to increase the level of support received by QIY.
Appendix A

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT
Consent to Participate as a Research Subject

I hereby acknowledge that I am between 18 and 20 years old and agree to participate in research that will be conducted by Rachel Pearman, Teacher Education graduate student at California State University, Sacramento. The research will involve the following procedures:

Completion of an online questionnaire determining high school graduation, entrance into college, and measuring the supportiveness of the high school environment toward queer identities.

The questionnaire is attached for your review. You do not have to answer any questions that cause you discomfort. The questionnaire will require approximately fifteen minutes to complete. The interview consisting of the same attached questions will require about thirty minutes to complete. The in person interview will be conducted in private with only the researcher present. The completed questionnaire and digitally recorded interview will be reviewed only by the researcher and will be destroyed within six months. There will be no identifying information on the questionnaire or in the digital recording.
The purpose of this research is to:

To determine to what extent high school graduation rates and college entrance rates are positively or negatively affected by the level of support queer youth believe was provided to them in high school.

I understand that this research may have the following benefits:

It may help identify ways in which schools can better support queer students.

Rachel Pearman provided this information. I understand that she will answer any questions I may have now or in the future with regard to this research.

I understand that my participation in this research is entirely voluntary. I may decline to participate at any time without risk. I understand that the researcher may terminate my participation at any time.

I understand that I will not receive any compensation for participating in this study. I understand that the term queer will be used in this research and is used as an umbrella term to encompass multiple gender identities and sexualities including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and any other non-heteronormative sexual or gender identity. Furthermore, I understand that I can identify in any way that I choose including not identifying at all.
There will be no identifying information on the questionnaire or in the digitally recorded file, and that all information collected will be used to find general themes and patterns, and will be presented in a manner that protects the identity for the participant. All information will be treated confidentially. Study results will be summarized only for the purpose of reporting on this project.

Signature: _______________________________ Date: _______________
Appendix B

SURVEY
SURVEY

1) Is there any demographic information you would like to share (age, ethnicity, gender or gender identity, sexual orientation or preferences, etc.)?

2) In what ways were you open about your gender expression and/or sexuality in high school?

3) Please share any positive or supportive interactions with peers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

4) Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with peers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

5) Please share any positive or supportive interactions with teachers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

6) Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with teachers you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

7) Please share any positive or supportive interactions with other faculty (principals, counselors, etc.) you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.
8) Please share any negative or discouraging interactions with other faculty (principals, counselors, etc.) you remember from high school as they related to your sexuality or gender identity.

9) Did you ever feel unsafe at school? If yes why did you feel unsafe, how frequently did this occur, and how did you cope with this feeling?

10) Did you graduate from high school? If yes did you graduate on time?

11) Did you go to college? If no please explain why.

12) What if anything did your high school do to support queer students?

13) What if anything so you think your high school could have done to be more supportive of queer students?

14) Do you have any other thoughts on these issues?

15) What would you like your fake name to be in the research? (If you do not choose one, one will be chosen for you by the researcher.)

16) Would you be willing to participate in a follow up interview in person or through an online chat?

Please return this survey and a signed consent to participate form to queer.researcher@gmail.com
REFERENCES


