University of Alberta

The Social and Cultural Conditions for
Sexual and Gender Minority (SGM) Students in a Rural Community:
A Case Study of Educators' Perspectives

by

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Dedication

To my husband Phil.
Words I never thought I'd write.
So happy I can.

Abstract

In order to combat sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth suicide ideation and completion, the cultures of schools must change to become accepting and inclusive of this vulnerable group. SGM youth in rural spaces are at greater risk than their urban counterparts. For changes to occur, a deep understanding of the social and cultural conditions that exist for SGM youth is required. This research focused on six educators in the Battle River School Division interested in improving the conditions for SGM youth in their schools. Through the course of two semi-structured focus group discussions, participants were encouraged to share their experiences, including challenges and successes, in the project of creating inclusive environments for SGM students. Using a case-study approach allowed me to illuminate educators' lived experiences through narratives. Strategies reported to be useful in creating more inclusive environments for SGM youth are identified and recommendations for transgressing barriers are provided.

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First and foremost I need to thank my queer guru and supervisor (in that order) Dr. André P. Grace. We met over coffee and somehow it turned into this. Thank you for your guidance and patience. While you have done much so much for me, it is the work that you do to make the lives of sexual and gender minorities better that above all is what I am thankful for.

When the articles, books, classes, theory, research and writing began to weigh on me I needed only to recall the youth whom I have had the pleasure of working with at Camp fYrefly. They would carry me through and get me back on track. They are the reason that this research was done: to make our schools and communities better for the sexual and gender minority youth now and in the future.

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My parents never insisted that I go to university, but it was made clear that high school would not be the end of my educational journey. Here I am, 12 years later, having made education my life. The values you instilled in me push me to do well, be better, and lend a helping hand in whatever way I can. I continue to learn through the ways you lead. I am still not a very good spellar though.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Personal Narrative

I was born and raised in northern British Columbia in a small city called Fort St. John, population 15,000. The closest major center was Edmonton, which was an eight-hour drive away. Suffice it to say, the town existed in relative isolation. My connections to the outside world were through occasional family vacations, television, books, band trips, and a young, barely formed Internet. A romantic innocence was afforded me in my early years because of this isolation. The town in many ways existed, and may still exist, in a bubble. The world seemed smaller there which, as a child, was comforting. However, as I grew into adolescence I had to face the diverse challenges that community size and prevailing attitudes re/presented. I began to recognize that there was a limited range of acceptability. Because of the colour of my skin and firmly middleclass upbringing I was born into considerable capital, both economic and cultural (Bourdieu, 1986). Being a white middle-class teen in a predominately Eurocentric northern community provided great privilege, making it easier to pass as heterosexual and fly under the radar of acceptability.

Ostensibly, no one in my hometown was gay; gay was a dirty word. Throughout my formative years, it became increasingly clear that I was attracted to men. I told myself I was not. There was a deep sense of shame, that these feelings were wrong and immoral. The portrayals of gay people in the media gave me little comfort. They tended to be stock stereotypes that represented

deviance or provided comic relief, serving as the butt of jokes. I did not identify with the predominately stereotyped versions of the gay male with which I was presented. I knew how to drive a tractor, change oil on a car, use power tools, and plant a garden. I knew no gay people, there were very few minorities, and the de facto religions consisted of various varieties of Christianity.

The culture of the community was one of hockey and even more hockey. While there are undoubtedly benefits to being raised in a small community, as I grew older it became increasingly clear that I did not fit the model of a small town boy. The heteronormative cultural expectations of the community permeated school life. I refereed hockey, but I was by no means macho: I sang in choirs, performed in musical theatre, and played piano. While I managed to find a group of friends and pass as straight, I struggled and saw others around me struggle. I felt that if I could pretend a little longer then I could get out of high school and move to the big city. My pervading adolescent perspective was that only in the big cities could one find sufficient anonymity—and by extension solace—to live as an out gay man.

Upon completion of high school I moved from the small town to the big city to attend the University of Alberta. I had been repeatedly told that I would make a good teacher and, having had teachers who inspired me in my formative education, set my sights on becoming one. Schools were places where I could make a difference, where I could inspire the next generation. Early in my undergraduate education I began to encounter situations and people who challenged the modern world that had been constructed around me. These

tremors in my binary built world disrupted my sense of self and place. Not only was there tremendous diversity with which I had previously had little exposure, more importantly there were conflicting viewpoints to which I had previously not been privy. It was during this time that philosophical seeds were germinating in mind: growing was the notion that schools should serve as much more than places where children simply learn to read. University was exactly what it should have been: an opening to new ways of understanding the world and my place in it.

I remember going to a lecture on the rights of LGBT teachers in Alberta. It was the first time that gay rights, gay people, indeed gay anything had been discussed in a class. My heart raced throughout the presentation. I felt like every eye in the room was on me. Simultaneously my heart was swelling with hope; there were provisions in place for people like me. Others had gone through this and I was protected in the profession I was entering to be myself. The presentation stayed with me during my undergraduate education eventually bringing me to ask myself: How can I expect my students to be comfortable in their skin if I am not comfortable in my own? How can I model authenticity until I am honest with myself? I came out in my third year at university.

When I completed my degree I returned to my hometown and in time found myself back in the same high school classrooms, this time as a teacher. I was disheartened to find that the hallways I had walked through as a student five years earlier had changed very little. While there were new faces, they projected the same homophobic tone: inanimate objects were still gay, male students were

still called fags in the hallways, girls who did not fit the mold of traditional 'femininity' were called dykes. For me, it came to a head in the staffroom over lunch one day. A female student had shaved the sides of her head and fashioned a rather impressive spiky Mohawk. I viewed her new haircut as youthful, adventurous, and an assertion of her individuality. Other teachers reacted with disgust, openly mocking her, with one teacher going so far as to label her a dyke. Students calling other students names is unsettling, but teachers calling students names is unacceptable. The environment was poisonous. How could a student imagine coming out in a setting where they knew teachers—let alone students—to be unquestionably, downright, homophobic. I indicated that I did not think that the comment was appropriate, which was consequently brushed off. Sadly, as a new teacher I did not have the audacity to report this incident to the administration, nor did any other teacher in the staffroom that day. I wish I had said or done something but having had no indication of a desire for SGM inclusion within the school on behalf of the administration, I had little faith that any action I would take would result in anything but a target on my head. I have reflected on this example often. It is sadly one of many. During my time teaching, I heard homophobic and transphobic comments from students, staff and administration far too often; these were observable, audible, and quantifiable behaviours. Language has power and affects culture, and permitting pejorative exclusionary language to persist contributed to a poisoning of the culture. As a gay teacher that was certainly the case for me and almost assuredly it was the case for both presumed and actual SGM youth. An unseen subversive current of

homophobia and heteronormativity ebbed and flowed below the social surface of life in the culture of my rural school. I found myself asking: Who is there to protect the students and create a welcoming safe and caring school environment if not the authority figures in the school?

My experience teaching in a rural northern community started a journey that brought me to this research. A lecture in my third year of university gave me hope that the teaching profession was, at least in terms of policy—the Alberta Teachers' Association's *Code of Professional Conduct* and the *Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities for Teachers,* and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*—accepting of gay people. That knowledge had affected me deeply; I knew the power of policy in affecting positive change. It brought me back to academia with the hope that my work could help others in rural locations looking to improve the conditions for SGM youth in their schools.

Growing up I had great difficulty reconciling my sexuality and my identity as a northerner. I was therefore unable to envisage myself as one cohesive being; rather, I saw myself as fragments in different times and different places. It is that intersection which I have explored in this research and throughout the literature, the intersection of the queer body and rural space; the sensation of being excluded from a true sense of belonging and understanding within and by a community; being both an insider on the outside and, simultaneously, an outsider on the inside; on one hand, not feeling a connection to gay or queer culture and, on the other, not experiencing a unified existence within the rural culture.

Historical Positioning

In 1998 the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in favour of Delwin Vriend, a gay teacher who had been fired from a Christian college because of his sexuality. This challenge to Alberta Human Rights legislation paved the way for various institutional (including educational) policy changes across Canada (Grace, 2007). One resulting policy change was the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) passing a resolution to extend the definition of what is considered discrimination to include sexual orientation in the ATA *Code of Professional Conduct* for sexual-minority students in 1999 (Grace, 2000). In 2000 the same protection was extended to teachers in the *Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities for Teachers* (Grace, 2000). In recent years Alberta Education has instituted an anti-bullying policy which ensures protection from verbal bullying whether it be "name calling, sarcasm, teasing, spreading rumours, threatening, making references to one's culture, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation, unwanted comments" (http://education.alberta.ca/teachers/safeschools/bullying-prevention.aspx). Yet, as talking with teachers from rural communities indicates, they have anecdotally reported a disconnection between policy on the page and policy on the ground. Being a sexual-minority person, and having grown up and taught in a rural community in northern British Columbia, the need for change is readily apparent. The needs of sexual and gender minority (SGM) persons are not being met due to institutional silences around SGM issues in many communities. As Atkinson contends, "All social systems are vulnerable at their margins, and that

all margins are accordingly considered dangerous" (2004, p. 599). Therefore, we can conjecture if sexual-minority persons are no longer marginalized they will no longer be viewed as dangerous. Teaching professionals are bound by a code of conduct and this research looked at how six individuals have taught to transgress in order to engage in an ethical practice as the full requirement of their profession.

The Evolving Lexicon of Queer

In the process of compiling the literature review, formulating my research design, and generating findings, I was confronted with a great many terms and initialisms in the literature describing essentially the same group of minority peoples. While there are social and political rationales behind each one, they may cause the reader occasional confusion. I have reviewed them here to help alleviate confusion and to exploration the changing nature of language and acceptability of SGM people.

Early scholarly work, rooted particularly in the medical establishment, applied the term homosexual (Halperin, 2002; Kinsey, 1948). This has largely fallen out of favour, as it is associated with a history of pathology rather than sexual ontology. It tends to be viewed now by most in the gay community as a pejorative term. In a similar way, the colloquial term 'sexual preference' has largely been abandoned as it suggests that sexual orientation is a choice. A growing body of scientific research has done much to discredit this hypothesis (LeVay, 2011).

Many of the writings from the 1980s use the terms gay and lesbian, but they tended to omit or overlook bisexual and trans-identified individuals (Sedgwick, 1993; Seidman, 1993; Warner, 1993). In the 1990s some authors utilized the term 'lesbigay' when discussing lesbian, bisexual and gay individuals (Monahan, 1997). Again, trans (trans-identified), intersex, and questioning individuals were marginalized in this framework, not to mention two-spirited people who continue to be grossly under-represented in scholarly work (Gilley, 2006).

In academic writing, grassroots movements, and even mainstream culture, initials soon began representing the spectrum of those within the sexual and gender minority community. Most are familiar with some variation of the initialisms that have been and continue to be applied including, GLB, LGB, LGBT, GLBT, LGBTQ, LGBTTQ, LGBTQI, GLBTIQ, etcetera. Ensuring that no one is left out becomes rather unruly, leaving us with LGBTTQQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, two-spirit, queer, questioning, intersex, and allied). Even in this configuration people are still left out and marginalized such as people like the hijra, a subculture in South Asian countries that are often intersex or transsexual (Nanda, 1996). As the order of the letters may suggest hierarchy, and therefore confer importance, they have been ordered and reordered ad nauseum.

As the 21st century enters its second decade terms such as sexual-minority, sexual and gender minority (SGM), and sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) have emerged. Academic works often define the use of such

terms by identifying the groups they have included under their umbrella. Because of the broadness of these terms, there is room for the margins, for the other. In this configuration there is no inferred hierarchy as there may be with initialisms. These terms can be interpreted as a step in the direction of community inclusivity.

Queer has existed on the fringes, but is making its way from its modest roots in the late 1980s (see Chapter 3) into the mainstream consciousness. Queer continues to be reclaimed as an all-encompassing term representing a resistance and insistence against mainstream traditional views and definitions of sex, sexuality, and gender identity (Butler, 2006).

It should also be noted that some individuals and groups resist the temptation to generalize and group unlike things together in the service of efficiency and/or simplicity; that is, by simplifying many groups into one term (initial, phrase, etc.) we run the risk of essentializing and losing the unique identities, struggles, and successes that mark each group, community, and community within community.

In the course of this thesis I have endeavored to be consistent in using either sexual and gender minority (SGM) or queer. Having said that, many of the authors cited have utilized the aforementioned terms and they therefore appear in the course of this work. The scholars' choice of terms to describe the vast diversity of sexuality and gender identity is indeed a reflection of their time, opinion, position, positionality, subjectivity, reflexivity and of societal and culture conditions, changes, and challenges. The terms are, in and of themselves,

telling of the progress and changes that have occurred in communities over time. Certainly these terms will continue to be reconceptualized in communities, media, and academia. They will evolve, morph, and continue to be reclaimed in order to best represent individuals whom identify within and across the spectrum of sex, sexual and gender differences.

Chapter Breakdown

A review of current literature concerned with SGM issues is presented in Chapter 2. In order to formulate my research project, a review of applicable literature attending to the social and cultural conditions of SGM youth is provided. Three distinct bodies of research are identified as being central to construct an appropriate research design and approach dealing specifically with educators' in the rural space. The first is an overview of large-scale quantitative studies that have taken place in the United States and Canada. This research provides a general overview of the current conditions in schools for SGM students. As my research is concerned with investigating and interrogating the social and cultural conditions in schools for SGM students, it was prudent to review literature concerned with improving the cultures of schools for SGM students. Because the participants in my research were educators, the research is approached from this perspective, addressing what changes educators can enact to create more inclusive and welcoming spaces. Finally, the third type of literature explored is concerned with the social and cultural conditions of SGM individuals living in the rural space. While there has been limited scholarly

activity in this area, the work of various researchers reviewed herein was useful in identifying research approaches and questions specific to the rural space.

Chapter 3 explores queer theory and how it can be applied in the rural space in the project of developing agency in SGM students. Key theorists are introduced and queer and queer theory are defined. The research conducted comes from a transformative change perspective grounded in queer theory (Butler, 2004). I explore how queer theory may be useful in the project of transgressing homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism by strategically politicizing queer issues in the rural space. I have juxtaposed queer theory with my experiences growing up in the rural north.

The fourth chapter outlines how the research process was formulated and conducted with six educators in the Battle River School Division (BRSD). As the research is guided by queer theory, both sampling and research methods are justified within the paradigm. The focus group process is detailed and a rationale for structuring the process is provided.

The findings of the focus group research process are presented in Chapter 5. The data findings and analysis are grouped thematically into (a) changing conditions for SGM, (b) top-down changes, and (c) grassroots changes that participants reported through the course of the focus groups. The final section of this chapter identifies barriers to creating more inclusive school spaces for SGM students in the BRSD and explores how educators in rural spaces might transgress those barriers.

Finally, in Chapter 6 the research findings are summarized and possible future steps to further improve the social and cultural conditions of SGM students are envisaged. As well, both the utility and deficiencies of using the research focus group process within a queer theoretical paradigm are reviewed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Contemporary Research Overview

As evidenced by the shear number of scholarly publications, there has been in recent years increased attention paid to the study of sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth in the area of education and schooling. A review of landmark publications and major studies in this area is important to situate the research completed as part of this thesis within a larger context. I have divided the literature into three categories of review: (a) major quantitative studies of the current social conditions for SGM students in schools, (b) scholarship concerned with creating safe and caring inclusive classroom/school environments for SGM students, and (c) research concerned specifically with queer bodies in the rural space.

National Qualitative Studies

Three national surveys have taken place in recent years that provide reliable overviews of the conditions for SGM students in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Canada (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; Hunt & Gensen, 2007; Taylor et al., 2011). In the United Kingdom, Hunt and Jensen released *The School Report,* commissioned by the Stonewall organization, in 2007. While the study identified similar trends to both the GLSEN (USA) and Egale (Canada) studies, the latter studies are more recent and focus on the North American context. Being mindful of geography and

timelines, both the American and Canadian studies are reviewed in depth. They have informed, and will continue to inform, research into SGM youth and have been vital in formulating the research project completed for this thesis.

The American Context: GLSEN's National Climate Survey

Large-scale survey-based studies provide an overall snapshot of a population and, when conducted with frequency over a number of years, can serve to illuminate changes in the population. In the United States GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network) has been conducting such a survey - the National School Climate Survey - every two years since its 1999 start date. The findings of the 2009 report focus on the changes that have taken place in schools over the course of a decade and provide insight into the current conditions in American schools for SGM youth. GLSEN's 2009 report is entitled the *National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools.* In it Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, and Bartkiewicz (2010) examine 1) language, including homophobic and biased remarks; and 2) safety, reporting on those that felt "unsafe in school because of personal characteristics, such as sexual orientation, gender expression, or race/ethnicity" (p. xv) and those that missed "classes or days of school because of safety reasons" (p. xv). The report also surveyed those who had experienced "harassment and assault in school" (p. xv). The research scrutinized the possible negative effects that a hostile school environment "could have on [LGBT] students' academic achievement, educational aspirations, and psychological

well-being" (Kosciw et al., 2010, p. xv) and correlated possible positive effects for LGBT[1] students in light of GSAs (gay straight alliances), LGBT policy framework(s), supportive school staff, and inclusive curriculum.

The 2009 iteration of the survey had 7,261 respondents (Kosciw et al., 2010, p. 7) who were identified through community groups and via the Internet. This contrasts starkly with the initial survey in 1999, which netted just 496 respondents (GLSEN, 1999). This change is important to note, as, in the 2009 survey, the Internet accounted for 6,906 of the total surveys completed. While the spread of the Internet—in particular social media—has made it easier to locate research participants resulting in a larger sample, one shortcoming is that those being sampled must self-identify as LGBT, queer, or questioning. On social media sites "notices about the survey were shown to users between 13 and 18 years of age who gave some indication on their profile that they were lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender" (Kosciw et al., 2010, p. 7). Those who are in the closet or who do not declare their sexuality publically (via Facebook profiles, for example) may be marginalized and/or overlooked in the sampling. In spite of any sampling omissions the results presented here from the key findings of the 2009 GLSEN report are nonetheless alarming (Kosciw et al., 2010, p. xvi):

- 88.9% of students heard "gay" used in a negative way.
- 72.4% heard other homophobic remarks (e.g., "dyke" or "faggot") frequently or often at school.

[1] LGBT is the term used to describe sexual minority people by Kosciw et al. in the report.

- 62.6% heard negative remarks about gender expression (not acting "masculine enough" or "feminine enough") frequently or often at school.
- 61.1% felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and 39.9% because of how they expressed their gender.
- 84.6% were verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) at school because of their sexual orientation and 63.7% because of their gender expression.
- 40.1% were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation and 27.2% because of their gender expression.
- 18.8% were physically assaulted (e.g., punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) because of their sexual orientation and 12.5% because of their gender expression.
- 52.9% of LGBT students were harassed or threatened by their peers via electronic mediums (e.g., text messages, emails, instant messages or postings on Internet sites such as Facebook).
- 62.4% of students who were harassed or assaulted in school did not report the incident to school staff, believing little to no action would be taken or the situation could become worse if reported.
- 33.8% of the students who did report an incident said that school staff did nothing in response.
- Students were 3+ times likelier to have missed classes (29.1% vs. 8.0%) and 4+ times likelier to have missed at least one day of school (30.0% vs. 6.7%) in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable, when compared to the general population of secondary school students.
- Students were 3 times as likely to have missed school in the past month if they had experienced high levels of victimization related to their sexual orientation (57.7% vs. 18.0%) or gender expression (54.3% vs. 19.9%).

Though conditions have improved for SGM students since 1999, SGM youth still face considerable violence, symbolic (such as name calling and homophobic graffiti) or otherwise, in schools. The report indicates, for example, that while hearing homophobic language has decreased (since 1999), "LGBT students' experiences with more severe forms of bullying and harassment have remained relatively constant" (Kosciw et al., 2010, p. xvx). While progress has certainly been made in the United States of America since the inaugural survey in 1999, the results still paint a distressing picture of the social and cultural conditions for SGM youth living there. Reviewing GLSEN's finding and contrasting them with other quantitative studies, and the Canadian Egale study in particular, was helpful in formulating the research conducted in completion of this thesis and in coming to a better understanding of the social and cultural conditions for SGM youth.

The Canadian Context: Egale's *Every Class in Every School*

In the Canadian context, the first national survey investigating the conditions for SGM youth in schools was completed in 2011. Egale Canada, a "national lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) human rights organization: advancing equality, diversity, education and justice" commissioned the study (http://www.egale.ca/index.asp?lang=E&menu=2&item=1152). Taylor and her colleagues (2011) released the final report of the study entitled *Every Class in Every School: The First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools.*

While similar in approach to the research done by GLSEN, *Every Class in Every School* took an expanded and different approach to sampling. Rather than sampling only self-selected individuals who stumbled upon the research through Facebook or as a member of a randomly generated list of community organizations (Kosciw et al., 2010), Taylor and her co-researchers surveyed "by two methods: individual participation via a publicly accessible website, and in-class participation via a controlled-access website" (2011, p. 39). Having in-class representation indicates implicit school-based consent; this is to important note since the institutional act of participating in educational research indicates a willingness or desire to affect change and improve educational opportunities and/or settings (Macgillivray, 2004). Another major difference between the two national surveys is that in Canada both straight and queer identified students were included in the research sample. Because of the addition of non-queer students, the results can be interpreted as more representative of average school aged youth's impressions of the conditions for SGM students within the school system. Of the 3607 youth who completed the survey, 14.1% identified as LGBTQ[2] (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 39). This contrasts sharply with the GLSEN research where only LGBT youth were surveyed. However, the findings of the *Every Class in Every School* are comparable in many respects to the GLSEN findings. Taylor and her colleagues (2011) outline some of the key findings which include (pp. 15-18):

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[2] LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning) is the term used to describe sexual minority people by Taylor et al. in the report.

- 70% of all participating students, LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ, reported hearing expressions such as “that’s so gay” every day in school and almost half (48%) reported hearing remarks such as “faggot,”“lezbo,” and “dyke” every day in school.
- 74% of trans students, 55% of sexual minority students, and 26% of non-LGBTQ students reported having been verbally harassed about their gender expression.
- 68% of trans students, 55% of female sexual minority students, and 42% of male sexual minority students reported being verbally harassed about their perceived gender or sexual orientation.
- More than one in five (21%) LGBTQ students reported being physically harassed or assaulted due to their sexual orientation.
- 37% of trans students, 21% of sexual minority students, and 10% of non-LGBTQ students reported being physically harassed or assaulted because of their gender expression.
- 80% of LGBTQ students from schools with anti-homophobia policies reported never having been physically harassed versus only 67% of LGBTQ students from schools without anti-homophobia policies;

Of particular interest was that “almost 10% of LGBTQ students reported having heard homophobic comments from teachers daily or weekly” (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 15). This finding illustrates how LGBTQ students across Canada perceive some teachers’ acceptance of SGM people. This finding is consistent with my experience teaching in the rural space. Authority figures certainly occupy the role of ally, but unfortunately students can also perceive them as the polar opposite as well.

Geographically, “almost half (46%) indicated living in a small city or suburban setting, followed by 43% from urban areas, and 11% from rural

environments, First Nation Reserves, or Armed Forces Bases" (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 42). However, in the analysis Taylor and her colleagues chose regions of Canada rather than urban vs. rural divisions to compare data. Specifically, the researchers chose to compare large geographical areas: British Columbia, the Atlantic Provinces, and the North:

> Students' reported rates of being comfortable talking about LGBTQ matters with their teachers (only 54.1% in BC to 63.7% in the Atlantic provinces) … their classmates (only 53.0% in the North to 66.9% in the Atlantic provinces), and their parents (only 51.0% in the North to 68.0% in the Atlantic provinces). (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 104)

While this approach provides valuable data and insights into the conditions for SGM students in Canada, the quantitative nature of the research fails to illuminate the individual struggles and the intersectionality of SGM bodies in isolated rural spaces. Individual voices are marginalized in the service of producing generalizable data.

Queer Research in the Classroom

In addition to large survey-type nation-wide qualitative studies, I have consulted queer literature focusing on teachers and staff creating inclusive school/classroom environments for SGM youth. The focus groups conducted for this thesis centered on educators' experiences in the school and community with regard to the social and cultural conditions of sexual minorities. This body of literature proved helpful in formulating a design for the research conducted by

informing questions and discussion topics intended to uncover successes and challenges in creating inclusive spaces for rural SGM youth.

Creating Inclusive Safe Spaces for SGM Students

There is a large body of work centered on sexual orientation and gender identity in the context of youth in schools, especially with regard to building safe and caring inclusive classroom and school environments. While most of the research currently available does not take into account the unique space that rural communities occupy, it lays the groundwork for action and change. Emerging from this body of research is a building consensus around the general steps that school districts, schools, school administrators, teachers and other school-based workers can take when looking to create/build/establish/foster a school culture inclusive to all students. These steps are concerned with, but not limited to, policy and policy implementation; curriculum inclusivity; staff training and professional development; language use in schools and inclusivity of language; and strategies to be developed in the service of changing school culture (Besner & Spungin, 1998; Erlandson, 2002; Grace, 2007; Harbeck, 1992; Monahan, 1997; Macgillivray, 2004; Wells, 2002).

Policy and policy implementation. MacGillivray (2004) views localized policy at the district level or school to be the first step to respecting difference; in his study of SGM specific policy, teachers believed that "along with a better climate has come more support and inclusion for GLBTIQ people and perspectives" (p. 44) after inclusive policy has been enacted locally. Both

GLSEN's (2009) and Egale's (2011) findings provide quantitative evidence that SGM students experienced similar positive correlation in improved school environments when specific SGM policies were in place. In order to understand the content and implementation of such a policy in the rural space it is critical to consider and be cognizant of the social and cultural conditions within community. At the same time, practitioners must be forward thinking enough to strategically politicize equity and social justice around SGM issues. Regardless of the nature of the space—urban or rural—educators have an ethical responsibility to "acknowledge the diversity among their students, as well as embrace these differences and treat their students as raced, gendered, sexual, and classed individuals" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 35); a school or district policy explicitly protecting sexual minorities makes that professional responsibility all the more concrete. Policy does not ensure protection but, as Grace (2007) states, "policy enables protection" (p. 35). Policy, even informal teacher specific classroom policy, is critical in the creation of inclusive school environments.

Policy creation can be a highly contentious and time-consuming endeavor complicated by a pervasive conservative desire to maintain the status quo. Once policy has been created and enacted the issue of implementation becomes paramount and that, of course, comes with its own set of hurdles. Macgillivray (2004) identifies several of the barriers to enforcing policy implementation, which include insufficient top-down support; staff being unfamiliar, unaware, or not understanding SGM specific policy; a general lack of resources for policy implementation and professional development; and fear of

being labeled gay or being outed as such (pp. 61-75). These considerations proved useful in formulating research questions during the focus groups.

Curriculum inclusive of SGM. The curriculum is central to the development of students and shapes and informs students' worldviews (Macgillivray, 2004). Monahan (1997) puts forth that "an important step to ending the discrimination which is faced by lesbigay students in the educational system is to challenge the silence surrounding the topic of homosexuality in school curriculum" (p. 212). Kluth and Colleary (2002) recommend asking the question "*Who is missing?"* as a way of introducing inclusivity into the curriculum in order to work within the framework of the curriculum set provincially while challenging its contents (p. 113). Administrators can ask this question of teachers during professional development opportunities and teachers can embed the question into classroom instruction for students. Besner and Spungin's *Training for Professionals Who Work with Gays and Lesbians* (1998), provides a wealth of in-class activities that can be integrated into the curriculum and during staff training in order to make the curriculum more inclusive of sexual and gender minorities. Pinar (2004) goes further than just asking about who is missing, encouraging practitioners to questioning where they are missing. He posits that reconstructing school culture means revisiting the curriculum, "especially those discourses considered central: the sciences" (p. 2). In order to radically challenge assumptions and embedded religious dogma throughout the curriculum, educators should critically reassess all areas of it. This insight and research was useful in formulating my research approach. Thus I considered:

How do teachers and school workers conceptualize curriculum inclusivity with regards to SGM students in their school community? What space is afforded in the political climate of a rural school to critically question who is missing? Who is marginalized, minimalized or forgotten?

Re-envisioning the curriculum as one that challenges students' ontological assumptions allows students to "understand that the identities of their peer groups and families constitute only a few of the countless historical and cultural ways to be human" (Kinchelow, 2006, p. 194). By incorporating SGM struggles and success into history, language, arts, and even science, students can come to more complete understandings of the encompassing global world in which they live. Conceptualizing the various modes of self-production of others allows students, both SGM and straight identified, to come to understand more about themselves.

Staff training and professional development. Professional development and establishing baseline expectations and standards for all staff is prudent for combating homophobia in schools and in order to establish an environment of equality. MacGillivray (2004) studied the effects of required professional development with attention paid to SGM issues; respondents reported that explicit professional development resulted in an improvement in the school environment with regards to SGM issues (pp. 62-63). Kluth and Colleary (2007) emphasize the importance of providing accurate information and challenging the attitudes and beliefs of teachers through a course of intentional professional development. There has been a wealth of scholarly research

providing accurate information for teachers regarding SGM people and issues (Besner & Spungin, 1998; Erlandson, 2002; Grace, 2007; Harbeck, 1992; Monahan, 1997; Macgillivray, 2004; Wells, 2002); however, challenging culturally hegemonic and engrained attitudes and beliefs can be more problematic. With that in mind, one of the intended outcomes of the research conducted for this thesis was to generate recommendations that could be useful in troubling the homophobic, transphobic, heterosexist and heteronormative values and beliefs that may exist in some rural school workers.

Language use in schools and inclusivity of language. Garrison, Anderson and Archer's *Community of Inquiry* model (2009)—which is typically applied to distributed learning, but is an effective frame for conceptualizing the educational process—contends that three separate and distinct elements make up the education experience: social presence, cognitive presence, and teacher presence. Without a safe, trusting education environment in place there is a barrier to learning and social presence decreases. Without a teacher, imbued with authority and power (referent or otherwise), modeling appropriate behavior and language use, teacher presence is decreased. Language shapes our world and by contesting language use both internally (as an individual teacher) and externally (insisting that students utilize appropriate language) the classroom and school culture has the capacity to change. Teachers are obligated, as professionals, to model inclusive language in the classroom and immediately address verbal and non-verbal harassment (Erlandson, 2002; Grace, 2007). Clearly there is a disconnection between policymaking and its implementation in practice if, in

2011, 70% of SGM and straight-identified students in Canadian schools report hearing "that's so gay" every day (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 15). Language can be slow to change, but its intentional use does have the power to affect the social and cultural conditions of the community, school, and classroom. The more teachers, administrators, and other adult role models working in schools stop tolerating derogatory homophobic, transphobic and heteronormative privileging language, the greater the cultural changes that will transpire thereby improving the social and cultural conditions for SGM students. Reframing language as more than 'just words' is important, as sexual and gender minorities are "victimized in schools by the lack of action of educators in stopping anti-gay commentary" (O'Connell et al., 2010, p. 295). Radical reinforcing the use of language as a tool of cultural change is paramount to affecting change in the lives of SGM students.

Strategy development in the service of changing school culture. Grace (2007) posits two questions when sexual minorities are being left out of the school culture/process: "What do school administrators need to know in order to include sexual [and gender] minorities in meaningful and deliberate ways in schooling and school culture?" and "How might school administrators be supported in this educational and cultural work?" (p. 33). Based on these questions, one goal of the focus group research process was to solicit geographically specific feedback on how educators can work within the school community to identify knowledge deficiencies around SGM issues and determine what supports are required to effectively challenge and renew school

culture. When change comes from within the system—be it the school or community—there is a sense of ownership; in effect, a grassroots approach to changing school culture can be enacted.

Improving Social and Cultural Conditions for SGM Students

As illustrated, research has informed many of the possible steps that districts, schools, administrators, and teachers can take to begin the process of creating more inclusive environments for SGM students. Certainly within the process of critically reflecting on the culture of the classroom there is opportunity for radical change by mobilizing peers, parents, and students as agents of change. Policy enables change, be it to reduce bullying, permit the creation of Q/GSAs (queer/gay straight alliances), or by allowing two boys to be each other's date to the prom. Inclusive curriculum expands the world not just for SGM students, but for all students allowing them to see and understand the many ways of being human and belonging. Professional development reduces stigma of the unknown and under-discussed, encouraging educators to reshape their understandings of students, colleagues and culture.

Queer Research in the Rural Space

Research focusing specifically on the rural space is limited but there are few notable studies that have brought to light sexual and gender minorities issues in that space; studies with special attention paid to the rural space have occurred in Massachusetts (DiFulvio, 2011; Goodenow, Szalacha & Westheimer, 2006),

Eastern Kentucky (Gray, 2009; Rostosky, Owens, Zimmerman, Riggle, 2003), Texas (Yarbrough, 2003), British Columbia (Saewyc, Poon, Wang, Homma, Smith, & the McCreary Centre Society, 2007; Poon & Saewyc, 2009), New York (O'Connell, Atlas, Saunders & Philbrick, 2010), and Ontario (Schneider & Dimito, 2008). Scholarly work focused specifically on the rural space, be it from the perspective of teachers, students, administers, or councilors, was integral in determining general themes to introduce during the focus groups. The rural space poses unique challenges for SGM people both in the educational space and greater community; there are issues concerning access, professional development, resources, privacy, and supports. Traditional conservative values tend to be pervasive in many rural communities; these values and belief systems are associated with intolerance for diversity, making it difficult for SGM youth (Yarbrough, 2003). Reviewing the key findings from these studies permits us to come to a better understanding of some of the general risks and struggles associated with growing up as a SGM person in a rural setting.

Setting the Rural Stage

In rural communities schools are often the de facto center of the community. They serve as the community gym, playground, soccer field, and meeting space as well as the center of democratic exercise come every election cycle. Local radio reports on the results of the high school volleyball team's latest victory and advertises the upcoming school play. The community and school intersect in many ways, with the cultures of each overlapping, blending

and bleeding into each other. Similar to many other community institutions in rural communities—like churches, clubs, or teams—the culture of the school community is highly visible and very public. Professionals, like teachers, tend to be well known within the community. When I was teaching it took only a few weeks for my students to know where I lived, for example. They knew my mother was a secretary at the junior high, and they quickly located my graduation photo on the school's wall. As an adolescent in the rural space, my experience was similar; everyone was connected in one way or another. If someone did not know me, they likely knew my mother, father, brother, uncles, aunts, cousins, or grandparents. This serves to illustrate that the culture of the small town contrasts starkly with the anonymity of the urban space. This has an effect on the comfort or ease a SGM youth may experience coming to terms and coming to understand their sexuality or gender in a space that is often conservative, and very public. This is not to suggest that the urban setting is superior to the rural environment; there are just different social operators at play. In my experience rural life tends to be less grey than the general culture of the urban space; that is, whatever falls outside established rural community norms requires considerable incubation before general acceptance. Greteman (2012) reflects on this with regard to sexuality and gender saying, "rural queer life is not incomplete or lacking but maintains and operates under different norms and understandings of sexuality and gender" (p.65). With changes and laws, policies and media, it is hoped that a general cultural shift will alter those understandings

of sexuality and gender to enable rural communities to become more diverse and inclusive.

Perceptions of SGM Students in Rural Education

As noted earlier, schools in rural communities are often, by default, the center of community activities and social supports. Consequently, educators are in the privileged positions, which can enable them to act as advocates for and facilitators of change in the lives of SGM students (O'Connell et al., 2010). Unfortunately, their discomfort and/or lack of understanding the needs of SGM students can also be barriers to inclusive change and support. As Schneider and Dimito (2008) posit, "LGBT teachers, and sometimes heterosexual teachers, often assume that they will be in jeopardy if they address LGBT issues openly" (p. 51). The O'Connell and colleagues' (2010) survey of 653 educational professionals in three New York counties found that "almost all respondents stated that they felt comfortable working with GLTBQ students; however, fewer are actually willing to do something for these students (e.g., to further personal knowledge about GLTBQ issues or create a safe place in school)" (p. 302). In spite of reported comfort working with SGM students, the vast majority of educators had not considered that the SGM population might require specialized support or services. When school personnel were asked if they would be willing to engage in professional development in the service of creating more inclusive safe spaces for SGM students, thereby increasing their knowledge and skills around SGM issues, a majority responded positively (O'Connell et al., 2010).

The data provides interesting insight into how teachers conceptualize and understand their SGM students. Certainly many teachers reported being supportive of their SGM students but, as research like the Egale (2011) and GLSEN (2009) studies reinforce, educational professionals often do not have the professional knowledges or resources required. There is a need to provide training for teachers focused on SGM issues, and they report being willing to engage in professional development to attain the knowledge and skills required. It is perhaps the responsibility of district and school administrations then to identify and elevate SGM needs and supports as a priority with the goal of improving the school community not just for SGM youth, but for the entire school community.

Barriers to prevention. Investigating possible barriers that prevent educators from acting in the best interest of SGM students allows us to envision solutions that may enable and/or encourage educators to work to the full scope of their practice. Schneider and Dimito's 2008 study of 132 K-12 rural and urban Ontario teachers and administrators asked them to rank the barriers which they believed prevented educators from responding to the needs of SGM students in meaningful ways. The top three barriers were: (1) parental protest (56%), (2) lack of information about effective strategies (46%), (3) and, fear of being harassed by students (40%) (p. 59). A majority also reported they believed that trustees and the school board did not want to deal with the issue. Schneider and Dimito (2008) suggest this "might be related to the fear that parents would protest" (p. 63). A breakdown of responses between urban and rural educators is

not provided but the results have interesting implications for the rural space. As indicated, the rural space tends to be much more public; people are aware of what happens at the school(s) and who is involved. It is therefore understandable that educators could be weary of parental protest or that being harassed by a student might extend beyond the school walls.

Mental health worker preparedness. The roles of mental health professionals, both in the community and inside schools, are worth review as these caregivers hold power and influence to affect the lives of SGM youth in the rural space. Eliason and Hughes (2004) found that while rural and urban counselors working with queer youth have similar attitudes towards their clients, urban practitioners have more formal education around LGBT issues, have more LGBT friends, and have worked with more LGBT clients. O'Connell and colleagues included mental health workers including school counselors and psychologists in their study, and they reported on some interesting differences between teachers and mental health professionals' approach to supporting and understanding SGM youth. Overall, mental health professionals reported more willingness than teachers to engage in professional development around SGM youth (i.e. workshops); have their offices be safe spaces; and discuss SGM issues with colleagues (O'Connell et al., 2010). In spite of this, "mental health staff did not feel as prepared to help LGBTQ youth as the administrators perceived them to be;" additionally, mental health staff believed there were fewer resources available for SGM students than administrators perceived were available (O'Connell et al., 2010, p. 303). This brings to light differences in

perceptions within schools around sexual and gender minority issues. While the administration believes the mental health professionals working in the school are equipped to support SGM students, the health professionals report a deficit.

Literature concerned with educators' responses to SGM issues in the rural space provides valuable insight into the unique considerations and issues that might arise or exist within the culture of the space. Additionally, the literature brings to light some of the considerations researchers should take into account when working with educators in the rural space in the project of improving the social and cultural conditions for SGM youth.

SGM Student Experiences in the Rural Space

As the identities of SGM people develop throughout childhood and into adolescence, the culture of the community and embedded social norms within it come to bear on their emerging sexual and gender identities. Adding the isolation of the rural space further complicates this process. As O'Connell (2010) reports, "Schools in rural areas, where there are often even fewer resources and more conservative values and beliefs, are often perceived by these youth as extremely challenging places in which to learn and grow" (p. 294). By consulting both quantitative and qualitative studies that focus on SGM youth in the rural space we can come to a better understanding of the intersection of queer identity and location, and envisage what special considerations need be taken into account for SGM rural youth in schools.

Rural versus urban conditions in British Columbia. Perhaps most applicable in the context of rural Alberta is the research completed by the Saewyc and associates for the McCreary Centre Society (2007), which is entitled *Not Yet Equal: The Health of Lesbian, Gay, & Bisexual Youth in BC.* Using the BC Adolescent Health Survey, these researchers collected statistics on urban and rural[3] LGB[4] youth in 1992, 1998, and 2003. While the data is almost ten years old, it is useful to provide insight into changes over time, differences between urban and rural settings, and the various ways in which the LGB population is more vulnerable than the heterosexual population. The data generated comparing the experiences of SGM youth in rural verses urban settings was perhaps most useful for the purposes of this research; above all it highlights the clear need for additional research in this area. Saewyc and her colleagues (2007) provide the following key findings that speak to risk taking and negative outcomes as endemic in the daily lives of SGM rural youth:

> Rural gay and bisexual males were more likely to report sexual abuse, and more likely to have attempted suicide in the past year…. Lesbian and bisexual females in rural and small towns were more likely to drink alcohol, and rural LGB youth were more likely to report binge drinking in the past month…. Rural lesbian and bisexual females were more likely to report first sexual intercourse before age 14…. Rural gay and bisexual

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[3] Saewyc et al. define "rural" as being less than 10,000

[4] Saewyc et al. apply the term LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) throughout the paper explaining that the research focus was sexual orientation not gender identify so transgender or trans-identified individuals are not represented within the scope of the research.

> males were more likely to have caused a pregnancy…. Rural LGB youth were more likely to report driving after substance use, and rural LGB youth were less likely to always wear their seatbelt…. Both male and female rural LGB teens were more likely to report they had been in contact with a stranger on the Internet that made them feel unsafe. (pp. 5-6)

The data reveals some worrisome trends for SGM youth growing up in the rural space in comparison to their urban counterparts. SGM youth are marginalized and at greater risk than heterosexual youth; adding the intersection of rural and SGM results in possible further marginalization and an increase in engaging in risky behaviours (Saewyc et al., 2010).

Suicide and substance in queer rural youth. Poon and Saewyc's (2009) secondary analysis of the BC Adolescent Health Survey data highlight additional concerns stating that, "suicidality was more prevalent among rural than among urban sexual-minority adolescent boys" (p. 120). O'Connell and colleagues (2010) also reported concerns for SGM youth in the rural space, as "sexual minority females in rural communities report the highest levels of depressive symptoms compared to gays and sexual majority youth in urban or suburban communities" (p. 295-296). Hong and associates (2011) posit that sexual minorities in "rural communities and communities with lower educational attainment are particularly at risk of encountering a hostile school climate" (p. 888) and, as a result, rural SGM youth are at greater risk of suicide ideation or completion. Also, coping with the isolation of living in a small town as a SGM

person may lead to substance use or abuse. Poon and Saewyc suggest that "substance use and risky social behavior may be a means of coping for some LGB adolescents, and these behaviors have been linked to stressors associated with the stigma of being or of being perceived to be LGB" (p. 121).

Academic achievement of queer rural youth. Research focusing on scholastic success, or often lack thereof, of SGM students in the rural space is also important in coming to a better understanding of the social and cultural conditions in that space. Rostosky's (2003) study of 2,078 grade 9 students in rural Eastern Kentucky found that "sexual minority adolescents reported significantly lower GPAs, significantly lower school belonging, and significantly more frequent alcohol use than sexual majority adolescents." (p. 745) Unfortunately the statistics do not improve for those on a post-secondary trajectory. Stapel (2008) reports that "rural sexual minority youth are only 65 percent as likely to aspire to a four-year degree as their straight peers" (p. 10). Across the board the results are disheartening, as Stapel (2008) poignantly summarizes:

> Given the depressed academic outcomes of both rural students and sexual minority students one would expect rural sexual minority youth to receive much attention from scholars of education yet little empirical research has been conducted on this population. (p. 5)

Having been able to identify only a few scholarly works addressing the academic achievement of SGM youth in the rural space, it is clear that additional research and supports are needed.

Qualitative SGM Research in the Rural Space

Much of the SGM research in the rural space has been quantitative, consisting of dozens, if not thousands of participants. These studies are useful in coming to a general understand of the unique conditions, behaviours, and concerns both held by and about SGM people. While there have also been a limited number of qualitative studies conducted with narrow parameters (as few as 8 participants), they at least allow the voices of the participants to be heard by sharing unique stories and struggles associated with living as a SGM person in the rural space. Rural qualitative studies that have been conducted provide useful lessons around analyzing data and faithfully communicating the struggles and successes of SGM people in the rural space.

Social connectedness in Massachusetts. DiFulvio (2011) engaged 15 rural and urban SGM Massachusetts youth, investigating their social connectedness or "the importance of belonging where youth perceive they are cared for and empowered within a given context" (p. 1612). Three themes emerged from her work: (1) affirming the self, (2) finding others like you, (3) and moving to action. Through the course of her interviews, DiFulvio came to the conclusion that youth grow into resilience through supportive social connection and individual and group affiliation, and through this support youth are able to move from personal struggle into collective action. The results of her study are illuminating for educators, particularly those working in the rural space. Being geographically isolated makes it all the more important that teachers and school-based workers counter social isolation by being a personal

connection and one caring person who allows youth to grow into personhood (Butler, 2004). The themes identified also highlight the importance of groups where the collective can support one another and grow as a group. DiFulvio (2011) states, "The presence of sexual minority youth groups, whether in schools or in the community, was a consistent forum which youth described as important to their sense of self and sense of safety in the world" (p. 1615). In the school community a G/QSA (Gay Straight Alliance or Queer Straight Alliance) allows collective support to exist and to be fostered in a safe and caring environment. Egale (2011) found that students in Canada who attended schools with GSA's were "much more likely to agree that their school communities are supportive of LGBTQ people, [and] are much more likely to be open with some or all of their peers about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity" (p. 19). O'Connell and colleagues (2010) also found "that schools with gay–straight alliances (GSAs) were viewed by all students, regardless of sexual orientation, as having a more supportive climate for LGBTQ students than schools without such programming" (p. 299). It would seem that encouraging social connectedness through individual and collective bodies not only has a positive effect on the individual, but also positively impacts the school community.

Queer historical perspectives from the rural southern USA. In North America, SGM rights and conditions have advanced markedly in the last 15 years. As such, I have focused the literature review on studies completed within the past few years; however, it is useful to situate the trajectory of SGM rights and conditions within a historical context as well. With the limited body of work

that has been done in the rural space investigating the social and cultural conditions as well as the psychological and sociological needs of SGM youth, each work provides a glimpse into the lived experiences of rural queers. Yarbrough (2003) conducted interviews with eight gay Texans who reflected on their experiences growing up in rural[5] locations. While much has changed in the course of nearly a decade, the participants' poignant insights into the experiences of gay youth in the rural space may still be applicable. Only half of the respondents reported, for example, that they knew of one or more teachers whom they believed would be supportive of the coming out process and only one of the eight participants reported knowing of an "out" teacher. When asked what advice the participants would give to young SGM youth, one of the participants suggested coming out early while the rest believed that in the rural space it was prudent to come out gradually; this is not terribly surprising as "participants who were not out in high school reported fewer negative experiences" (Yarbrough, 2003, p. 141) during their formative high school education. All but two participants reported being either physically or verbally abused as a result of their perceived sexuality or coming out. No participant was able to identify formal supports in any of the Texan towns where the participants grew up; there were no GSAs, no rainbow flags on the doors of the school councilors' offices. The only places they believed to be more accepting of sexual minorities were havens like the choir room and the drama class/club (Yarbrough, 2003).

[5] Yarbrough defines rural as being a population of less than 50,000 people.

Rostosky's study with 2,078 grade 9 students in rural eastern Kentucky, also published in 2003, echoes these findings. Rostosky concludes:

> Other important antecedents to school belonging may include the presence of gay-straight alliances and other gay affirmative support groups, the inclusion of gay affirmative curricular materials, and teacher and peer training to create hate-free schools. No such programming was available in any of the rural schools participating in this study, rendering the findings regarding sexual minority adolescents disturbing, but not surprising. (p. 750)

One would hope that the findings would be more positive if the research was conducted today. As desirable as it would be that some dramatic change has transpired in the intervening years, O'Connell and colleagues maintain that there are few "community-based supports in rural communities, so sexual minority youth are also less likely to have access to community-based support groups" (2010, p. 295). Importantly, the voices of the youth who participated in this research provide a useful snapshot of their coming out process and of life as a queer person in that space and time.

I came out as a gay man in 2003 in my third year of university, which is the same year this study was published. It is illuminating to reflect on my experiences in high school as a comparison. I do not recall seeing any queer positive materials in high school let alone the career and counseling office. The more queer positive spaces were the band room and drama room. While there may have been gay teachers and/or queer friendly teachers in my school, what is

indelible in my mind is the ones that were not. I could not have imagined coming out in high school; just like the participants in Texas, I feared that I would have become a target. While conditions may be improving for many SGM youth, the themes identified by Yarbrough are similar to many of the themes found in current research. It is helpful to review such works as they help situate where we were, conceptualize where we are now, and project a vision for where we are going.

Queer social justice in a new/social media world. Gray's book *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (2009) is a compelling ethnography of the rural queer experience and how increasingly, through the use of social media, queer bodies are asserting themselves beyond physical borders and subverting and contesting heteronormative constructions by queering the rural space in unique ways. Gray's book describes the urban space as one that is "built on a pride in what sociologist Georg Simmel theorized as 'the aggregation of so many people with such differentiated interests'" (p. 38). In contrast, the rural is organized around "an appreciation for solidarity expressed through blending in" (Gray, 2009, p. 38). With rural and urban dichotomized in this way one can conceive of the difficulties a SGM youth might face in an environment that cherishes sameness. Gray illustrates how queer youth "leverage their status as familiar locals, albeit perhaps 'strange,' to create a politics that makes their communities inhabitable for their queerness, even as their queerness operates within a strategy of circulation as opposed to congregation" (Greteman, 2012, p. 65). Gray (2009) contends that because there is not a critical mass of

queer people to create visibility within the space—as there is in the urban space—youth in the rural space rely on solidarity and familiarity in the pursuit of acceptance. By doing so youth maintain their so-called status as an insider without aggressively challenging the norms of the community.

Gray thoughtfully explores the use of rapidly evolving use of media by queer rural youth and how it is redefining their worlds, identities, and social and cultural boundaries.

> What distinguishes and clusters Internet-based personals, search engine results, coming-out stories, and chat rooms as genres of queer realness is that they provide moments of storytelling that transform how rural youth think and talk about their identities. (Gray, 2009, p. 127)

She suggests that the Internet – specifically, new media – has permitted and fostered the critical work of identity formation in the rural space which, before the Internet, was delayed into adulthood for many queer bodies. The user-contributed nature of social media allows the queer body to project itself into a virtual community where it can envision itself as a whole being, contesting the disharmony felt when exposed to the limited representations of SGM people in traditional media.

In contrast with much of the other SGM research centered around the rural space, Gray presents a rural America that is hopeful when she speaks about "the lives of rural LGBT youth who are not mere victims or living in the closet but thriving activists and community members seeking recognition and acceptance" (Greteman, 2012, p. 63). The book ends with a battle cry for

ethnographic qualitative research, calling on researchers to listen to the voices of rural SGM youth on the margins and to hear their stories of change and growth.

Out in the Country is an important work, especially within the context of this thesis. It is the only book I could find that deals specifically with queer youth in the rural space. While it is not generalizable in the context of my research, it develops useful themes around voice, identity, identity creation, and becoming possible in an often difficult space. The qualitative approach of this work illuminates voices and stories that would have otherwise been silent.

Concluding Remarks

Literature centered on SGM youth helped inform my research design by allowing me to come to a greater understanding of the current social and cultural conditions for SGM youth in Canada and beyond. Large scale nation-wide quantitative studies have provided a useful understanding of what life is like in schools for a queer youth but, as they are rather general, they fail to adequately illuminate individual voices or speak to considerations unique to the rural space. As the research conducted for this thesis focused on educators, it was important to consult academic research centered on identifying useful strategies in the project of creating inclusive environments for SGM youth. Finally, reviewing both qualitative and qualitative scholarship focusing primarily on the rural space was important to coming to a more full understanding of the unique social and cultural conditions that exist for SGM you the in that space.

Chapter 3: Queering the Rural Space

This research is approached from a transformational change perspective routed in Queer Theory. I have positioned myself in relation to the research conducted for this thesis in chapter one. Knowing how I got to this place and my motivations for conducting this research are both important to conceptualizing the project as a whole. Queer Theory provides a useful analytic research lens for conducting research, analyzing data and promoting social justice around sexual and gender minority (SGM) issues. Grace (2005) provides this overview of Queer Theory:

> Queer theory's primary goal is to expose heterosexism, [transphobia], and homophobia. It explores how ignorance and fear of queer lead to actual and/or symbolic violence toward queer (or those perceived to be queer) persons. Emerging from ideas found in queer social activism and in multi-perspective theoretical discourses including poststructural feminism and cultural studies, queer theory interrogates systemic and structural relationships shaped by limited understandings of sex, sexuality, and gender. … It works to dissolve the male/female and homosexual/heterosexual binaries. (p. 530)

Guided by the groundbreaking work of Judith Butler (1993, 2004, 2006), Eve Sedgwick (1990, 1993, 2008), Michael Warner (1993, 1999), and others who have contributed to the emergence of queer theory, the queer self in relation to the unique space that rural queer bodies occupy will be explored. Butler

writes, “The thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity” (Butler, 2004, p. 31). In the space of a rural context, I will explore how queer theory can help inform, politicize, and mobilize the intersection of subjectivities for queer bodies, making the thought of a possible life more possible. First, I will explore the concept of queer, noting how queer is envisaged in the context of Queer Theory. Second, I will review the history of Queer Theory, including its origins in poststructural feminism, and Queer Theory’s evolutionary progression from lesbian and gay studies. Third, I will envision Queer Theory’s politicizing qualities in the project of fostering agency. And finally, I will apply Queer Theory to explore multiple subjectivities and identity construction in the queer body in rural spaces.

Why Queer Theory?

In contrast with foundationalist theories of identity and ontology that came before it, Queer Theory is rooted in poststructuralist thought, which complicates identity in an exploration of multiple subjectivities (St. Pierre, 1997). The epistemological and ontological underpinnings of foundationalism viewed “individuals as free-thinking subjects… on which one conceives political and moral action” whereas poststructuralism “argues that subjects are not the autonomous creators of themselves or their socials worlds” (Namaste, 1996, p. 195). Within the realm of poststructuralism the unique social and cultural networks and lived experience of an individual or subject are seen as central to

an individual's development of self. Individual growth and development can be enabled or disabled by how power works and weaves its ways through lived experiences. This is a premise of Queer Theory:

> In its more subversive form, queer theory actually is one more variation on a poststructural theory of the self that is deeply suspicious of all identity categories, viewing them as (at least in part) regulatory mechanisms of the dominant culture, involved in locating the self within binary oppositional power relations and within the rigid boundaries or borders that police difference. (Pinar, 1998, p. 113)

Put simply, Queer Theory adds complexity and dimension to the poststructuralist framework by considering variations in sex, sexuality and gender in the composition of an identity, complicating the wealth of other characteristics and attributes that make a person. The goal is not to assimilate as expected within a foundationalist framework; rather, the thrust of Queer Theory is to celebrate difference and reject assimilation. Without positioning the self as gay or straight, the term 'queer' provides flexibility; a sort of non-binary label. In the process of unpacking Queer Theory as a formation that opens up ontological possibilities, I will unpack the term 'queer' in detail.

Just as social justice is a cornerstone of feminist theory, it is also central to Queer Theory and its application. As Judith Butler writes, "Feminism is about the social transformation of gender relations" (2004, p. 205). Consequently, Queer Theory centers on social change and cultural transformations focusing on interrogating understandings of sex, sexuality, and gender identity. Ideally,

Queer Theory should not live solely on the pages of periodicals and books. Queer Theory begins as academic discourse and, through careful application, it ought to be applied to address societal injustices. For example, Grace and Wells (2007) apply Queer Theory to the Freirean notion of praxis, positing that the intersection of sexual-minority studies and work in the queer community is not only useful in queer scholarship, but also necessary to its emergence as a discourse with meaning and value in practice. Grounded in poststructuralist feminism, Queer Theory has the capacity to provide a framework for investigating and uncovering the queer self within a transformative goal of politicizing and mobilizing for social justice. As Grace (2004) poignantly summarizes, "Queer theory is a transgressive theory where access and accommodation for Queer persons and citizens are about (re)positioning and transformation" (p. 302). In order to understand the formation of Queer Theory further, and how it can be usefully applied to the context of rural queer bodies, the term 'queer' requires deconstruction, the origins of Queer Theory must be reviewed, and ought to engage in exploration of how the theory can be applied to politicize queer acceptance, and ultimately celebration, in a rural context.

What/Who is Queer?

When I mentioned the term *queer pedagogy* to an art scholar from Tennessee, she shuddered. In inquiring as to what was wrong, she indicated that "queer" was an awful word that she was not used to hearing. Clearly queer does not hold the same meaning for everyone. To her queer harkened back to a history

in which the term had been constructed as a negative, even punitive word. So engrained was her aversion to the word that it manifested in a physiological response. To establish a baseline understanding of terminology, I will explore how queer (queerness, queer bodies) has been constructed and understood particularly within the framework of Queer Theory.

I identify as a gay man who is part of the larger queer community. I do not, nor cannot, presume to speak with authority for any experience other than my own. I use the term queer to be inclusive of gay, lesbian, trans-identified, two-spirited, intersexed, questioning and queer-identified individuals within the body of this thesis, but may revert to the term 'gay' when speaking about myself or my experience as I'm approaching this analysis from a transformative individuated position.

Queer is more than "an umbrella term for the indeterminate array of identities and differences that characterise persons in relation to sex, sexuality, gender, desire, and expression" (Grace, 2004, p. 167). In her book *Tendencies,* Sedgwick devotes several paragraphs to defining queer, at the end of which it is clear that queer is as nebulous as it is obvious. Sedgwick writes, "[It is] the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (1993, p. 8). The queer body is not merely defined by sex, sexuality, or gender; it is the amalgam of these in addition to a variety of "different histories, identities,

and needs as well as different ways of being, believing, desiring, becoming, belonging, and acting -- ways that constitute queerness" (Grace, 2004, p. 168).

While the terms gay and lesbian appear more easily definable, bordering on concrete, the term queer allows individuals the space to avoid description and prescription. In the introduction to his edited collection *Fear of a Queer Planet,* Warner posits that the impulse to self-identify as gay is declining whereas queer represents "an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal" (Warner, 1993, p. xxvi). In order to begin to understand, we can start with a description; however, the more we attempt to define queer, the less attainable that undertaking becomes. The opposition to a regime of the normal and rejection of heteronormativity creates a shell of a definition of queer, which is invariably variable, changing, morphing, becoming, doing, and undoing. While queer as "the Other" may seem plain and overly simplified, it is a suitable starting point to understanding. Still it should be said that the use of queer is not intended as a catchall either. The intent is not to diminish the unique struggles associated with the various spectrums of sex, sexuality, and gender represented. Queer is also inclusive of characteristics beyond sex, sexuality and gender. Queer is uniting while maintaining an acknowledgement of a spectrum of subjectivities within and across it.

From Lesbian & Gay Studies to Queer Theory. Queer Theory was born out of and, in some ways, in opposition to Gay and Lesbian Studies (or, Lesbian and Gay Studies). In order to come to a more complete and full

understanding of queer and Queer Theory and its trajectory, a brief history of gay and lesbian studies is required.

With the eruption of the Stonewall rebellion in 1969, the gay liberation movement emerged and entered into critical consciousness, which resulted in a very gradual shift in public attitudes into the 1970s and beyond (Greenberg & Bystryn, 1996). As a reaction, or response, to gay rights as a civil rights movement gaining momentum in the 1970s, Gay and Lesbian Studies began to gain limited visibility in academia. Though gay and lesbian issues were undeniably contained within the canon of classical literature, "such issues had tended to express themselves either privately or covertly" (Halperin, 2002, p. 5). Work in the areas of gay and lesbian history and cultural studies began to amass some institutional acceptance in the 1970s and 1980s. This, along with a reframing of classic literary works that alluded to homosexual characters and behaviour synthesized into what became termed Gay and Lesbian Studies (Halperin, 2002).

Teresa de Lauretis is credited with coining the term "queer theory" in a conference in 1990 after hearing "queer" used in a "gay-affirmative sense by activists, street kids, and members of the art world in New York during the late 1980s" (Halperin, 2003, p. 339). In the same year the grassroots activist group Queer Nation was established. It focused "on a discourse intended to subvert the heterosexual assumption, and undermine the notion that we all must act 'straight' in public spaces" (Davis, p. 293). While their existence was short lived, Queer Nation left an indelible imprint on activism and queer as a

poststructural construct. It was with Eve Sedgwick's groundbreaking work, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), that Gay and Lesbian Studies started to be reconceptualized within academe. Her poststructuralist framework challenged the presumption of binaries and the very nature of culture and societal construction within the heteronormative context of sex and sexuality. Sedgwick's book, along with Judith Butler's (1990) book *Gender Trouble,* laid the groundwork for a new understanding and politicizing of contemporary queer issues. Whereas works in the area of Gay and Lesbian Studies focused on the marginalized experience of the individual, *Epistemology of the Closet* sought "to analyze how various ways of construing sexual marginality shape the self-understanding of the culture as a whole" (Epstein, 1996, p. 144). By the mid-1990s Lesbian and Gay Studies nomenclature in the academy was being eclipsed by that of Queer Theory (Yep, 2004, p. 80).

While *Epistemology of the Closet* is often located as the catalyst for creating Queer Theory, it does not elucidate the formation of the theory or in fact the concept queer (Epstein, 1993). In *Tendencies,* Sedgwick (1993) describes how *Epistemology of the Closet* sought to explore homo/heterosexual binary assumptions that "Exacerbated a cultural site because of an enduring incoherence about whether it is to be thought of as an issue only for a minority of (distinctly lesbian or gay) individuals, or instead as an issue that cuts across every locus of agency and subjectivity in the culture" (p. xii). Challenging this binary assumption made space for a "queer" analysis, one that is as "antiseparatist as it is antiassimilationist" (Sedgwick, 1993, p. xii). Academics,

including Sedgwick herself, have applied "queer" concepts and sensibilities to *Epistemology of the Closet* in the intervening years. Sedgwick reflects on the legacy of *Epistemology of the Closet* in the Preface of the 2008 edition as well as the use of "queer."

> *Epistemology* doesn't use the word "queer." So what is queer about it? Retrospectively, I would say it's exactly this resistance to treating homo/heterosexual categorization—still so very volatile an act—as a done deal, a transparently empirical fact about any person…. The dividing up of all sexual acts—indeed all persons—under the "opposite" categories of "homo" and "hetero" is not a natural given but a historical process, still incomplete today and ultimately impossible but characterized by potent contradictions and explosive effect. (Sedgwick, 2008, p. xvi)

The work does not deny the existence of categories, nor does it insist that individuals should avoid self-identifying, for example as homosexual or heterosexual. Rather, it meticulously explores the historical process and implications of binary societal constructions, especially within the context of masculinity and patriarchy. Sedgwick interrogated these constructions and her approach challenged poststructuralist feminist dogma, adding complexity by addressing sex, sexuality, and gender—both in category and lived experience—in the creation of multiple subjectivities.

Feminism's role in developing Queer Theory. In order to come to a more complete understanding of Queer Theory, it is important to consider the

role that Feminism, and in particular Poststructuralist Feminism, has played in its development. Segwick declared *Epistemology of the Closet* to be a feminist book. She posited that feminist analysis was more mature and less dangerous "with a much more broadly usable set of tools available for its furtherance" (Segwick, 2008, p. 16) than other forms of analysis such as anti-homophobic analysis. The latter was still a newly emerging form of analysis while the former had had more time to develop and boasted a richer, more extensive set of tools and resources. What has been constructed as Queer Theory was based on the groundwork laid by feminist theory. In the preface to Judith Butler's 2006 reissue of *Gender Trouble,* she positions her approach to writing the work: "I was most concerned to criticize a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory…. and [it] remains my view that any feminist theory that restricts the meaning of gender in the presuppositions of its own practice sets up exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences" (2006, p. iii). Again, Butler illustrates how these early works in Queer Theory were based on feminist discourse and analysis, with the project of extending feminist analysis. Both Sedgwick and Butler problematize the narrow focus that feminist thinking had historically paid to the range of gender identities, sex and sexuality. While third-wave feminism challenged the notions of femininity and promoted a more inclusive vision of feminism and being female, the analysis of gender acceptability and range was deficient.

Queer Theory an extension of Poststructural-Feminism. As indicated, Queer Theory has a postfoundational framework. Postfoundational

epistemologies are concerned with critically questioning and analyzing cultural and historical omissions, marginalization, and the uncovering of oppressive and exclusionary hegemonic structures and practices. Grace and Hill (2004) point out, “Like other postfoundational theoretical and political positions that include poststructural feminist and postcolonial theories, queer conceptualisations work against humanism's authorisations and exclusions” (2004). The poststructural feminist discourse from which Queer Theory emerged is grounded in two perspectives. The poststructural perspective provides a deep theoretical tool set for interrogating hegemony, power, and socio-cultural political structures.

> Poststructuralism aims to destabilize identity as a ground of politics and theory in order to open up alternative social and political possibilities; poststructuralists seem to be positioned as a sort of theoretical wing of Queer Nation, with its insistent opposition to normalizing, disciplining social forces; with its disruptive politics of subversion; and with its opposition to both the straight and gay mainstream. (Seidman, 1993, p. 132)

The feminist perspective provides a rich history of tenacious mobilization, setting out to challenge, change, and rectify social injustices through grassroots action; political and otherwise. It is at the nexus of the political and the theoretical that Queer Theory interrogates and dismantles collective categories of identity and challenges constructions of normativity and performativity to expand possibilities for acting in the world.

Queer Theory as Political

In the context of rural queer bodies struggling to mediate societal constructions of identity, sexuality, and acceptability, Queer Theory provides a lens with which to challenge those presuppositions. Perhaps most germane within this context is to question how one can utilize and mobilize Queer Theory to challenge and ultimately change expectations and perceptions within communities and institutions. As Gamson (1996) point out, this can be problematic:

> Queerness in its most distinctive forms shakes the ground on which gay and lesbian politics have been built, taking apart the ideas of a "sexual minority" and a "gay community," indeed of "gay" and "lesbian" and even "man" and "woman." It builds on central difficulties of identity-based organizing: the instability of identities both individual and collective, their made-up yet necessary characters. It exaggerates and explodes these troubles, haphazardly attempting to build a politics from the rubble of deconstructed collective categories. (p. 395)

Disrupting the hegemony of heteronormativity, which is grounded in heterosexual privilege and socially instilled conceptions of a heterosexual/homosexual binary, is problematic within the framework of modernist thinking. In the context of this thesis, one of the challenges that Queer Theory has to overcome is attending to the needs of queer bodies in the context of rural spaces where a modernist practicality is often hegemonically applied to what can seem a hetero-regulated and insulated daily life. The isolation of rural

spaces affords a certain immovability; things are slow to change as the pressure to do so is negligible. For example, the version of family life, or sexual education, taught in my hometown was not the same version that was delivered to students in Vancouver. A watered down version of sexual education was instituted within the districted and delivered to students in CAPP (career and personal planning). It became clear that the district—or at least individuals teachers—was still skirting the provincial curriculum when I taught at the high school years later. My grade 11 students were unable to identify a form of contraceptive aside from condoms or "the pill" and lacked basic knowledge about STIs (sexual transmitted infections) and STDs (sexual transmitted diseases). This myopic thinking about sex and sexuality is an example of the modernist sensibility I have been discussing.

To counter these limits to educating, how can one politicize the social justice tenants of Queer Theory when the theory itself is the amalgam of fragments and subjectivities rather than so called universal truths and subjects? Here it is helpful to begin by considering ways in which queer bodies can achieve agency by challenging binaries and complicating categories through aggressively performing in ways that counter expected norms. This amounts to a politicization of queer being and acting in the world. It gets to the heart of Queer Theory: challenging heteronormativity as the acceptable way to frame the performativity of gender roles, sex, and sexuality.

Agency in the service of politicizing queer. Exploring the concept of agency is helpful in understanding the space that queer bodies are able to

occupy. Agency exists when individuals contest repressive social norms and are successful in securing accommodative space. According to Phelan (1997), "What we might call 'agency' or 'freedom' or 'possibility' is always a specific political prerogative that is produced by the gaps opened up in regulatory norms…in the process of their self-repetition" (p.17). Put another way, developing agency is a process of negotiating power matrixes and coming to new understandings about oneself and the world in which the individual is located. Agency, in the context of securing space in isolated rural communities, may take a starkly different form from the context of gaining urban social-political space. In terms of the size and location of the rural community, the queer agent/body mediating it is faced with a sort of monoculture. In the regulatory structure of rural space, the openings where one might seek and find agency are smaller, and for some, nonexistent. The ways rurality impacts access, acceptability, safe spaces, role models, inclusive dialogue, institutional acceptance, dangerous knowledge, and views on diversity complicates the process of achieving or acquiring agency.

Butler (2004) approaches the issue of agency by proposing a philosophical quandary: "If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility" (p. 3). Put another way, if I have agency it is because I recognize that I can be a subject in a social space not of my choosing. Just because my agency is marked by inconsistencies does not mean I do not have

any. In fact, it is when I recognize those inconsistencies and internalized tensions that I maintain and strengthen my agency. Growing up in a rural community as a queer adolescent I struggled to achieve a sense of agency; while the space was familiar, it was not of my choosing and those outside of the heteronormative status quo were not readily embraced. Developing a holistic sense of self and agency was delayed as a result of location. Perhaps disruptions in what is conceptualized as 'normal', via schools or the community, may open spaces for critically engaging 'the other' in the project of developing agency. Put simply, agency is being aware, questioning, and challenging space, limitations, and motivations of culture and society.

Queer Theory as mobilizing resistance. Queer, by its very nature, is political resistance; queer is about resisting norms, resisting labels, and contesting hegemony. Queer is political and queer is resistance. Halperin (2003) suggests "turning [queer] into a generic badge of subversiveness, a more trendy version of 'liberal': if it's queer, it's politically oppositional, so everyone who claims to be progressive has a vested interest in owning a share of it" (p. 341). In this scenario, the queer community is co-opted politically as a disaggregated network of individuals challenging the status quo. An interesting illustration of Halperin's thesis is how the composition of gay pride parades across Canada has changed in recent years. It has morphed from mostly gay men and drag queens to a dynamic range of queer bodies; from S&M enthusiasts, political parties, advocacy networks, and a whole range of queer identified and allied individuals and organizations. The pride parade has become a physical manifestation of

queer presence and political resistance to invisibility and exclusion. In Edmonton the pride parade has rapidly grown from a few hundred people to several thousand in the space of a few years. In fact, the celebration of queer and allied revelers has become so large it is expected to exceed the capacity of its current location in Churchill square (M. Phair, personal communications, December 12, 2010). It should also be mentioned that the tone of the parade is changing from the politics of protest to the politics of celebration; while protest is undoubtedly political, celebration is also a political statement, conveying acceptance and rejecting oppression, heteronormativity, and prescribed gender norms.

The act of identifying as queer is a political action against established norms and expectations. Wilson (1997) maintains that "sex and gender are performance, an acting out of social scripts about sexual behaviour through both speech acts and nonspeech or appearance. The way in which traditional scripts are to be challenged is by acting, if you will, out of character; suggesting through speech or appearance that those scripts are unsuited to expressing the fluidity of sexuality" (p.103). Performing in ways counter to the expected norm is a political act; a statement or a commitment to refuse to abide by heteronormative codes of conduct and speech. It is important to emphasize that performance is not limited to—or necessarily inclusive of—sexual acts; rather, it is how queer bodies think, act, behave, communicate, connect, disseminate, reflect, envisage, and construct their place in the world. By challenging societal scripts, queers communicate a rebellious disavowal of oppressive homophobic and transphobic norms and politicize their positionality by the simple act of being.

Negotiating Queer and Rural Subjectivities

Queer Theory resists exclusion, monoculture, absolutist definitions, binaries, discrimination, heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia. By exploring the multiple intersections of subjectivities of the self, we can begin to construct a picture of life and identity for the rural queer body.

> In this social ecology, queer can represent an intersection of relationships of power in a culture-language-power nexus. As w/e move within this nexus, w/e can begin to understand resistance to naming and speaking queer by exploring how queer as a construct intermeshes problematically with constructs of race, class, and other relationships of power that have their own histories of excluding queer. (Grace & Hill, 2004)

Here Grace and Hill illustrate the complexity of queer in relation to other subjectivities and identities; the queer individual is pulled in various directions by a matrix of power structures. How does a queer youth growing up on a reserve in northern British Columbia come to understand, or perhaps reconcile, their family values, cultural heritage, language, location, socioeconomic status, and age with their newly developing identity as queer? As many aspects of identity are steeped in histories of homophobia and transphobia, tacit knowledge of disenfranchisement exists within the individual and remains firmly in place if not critically interrogated.

In the space of exploring identity construction, how can we mobilize Queer Theory to foster resistance and resilience in youth? For queer youth

growing up in rural communities, critically questioning institutional discrepancies and sites of identity conflict may provide hope and open the queer body to the possibility of being possible, of being and acting in queer ways that reduce dislocation in rural locations.

Life in a small town: illustrations of external and internal culture.

One cannot presume to explore all the intersections of queer within any number of subjectivities and identity constructions. To explore issues of agency and identity I have applied two case studies in order to briefly explore these intersections. I will explore how popular culture can operate in a rural context, treating queer bodies with contempt through stereotypes and thereby complicating the construction of queer subjects. And, I will examine how rumour mongering in rural communities leads to a presumption of equating gay with bad, immoral, and less than acceptable.

One of the most pervasive influences in the life of a youth is popular culture (Gray 2009). By briefly discussing the current construction of queer on television, we see disjuncture between the fantasy of TV and lived experience of queers, especially in the rural space. For a questioning or queer rural youth, this disconnect is simultaneously hopeful and dystopian. While queer characters are more prevalent in the media now than ever before, a glaring stereotype still exists. Fortunately, the stock campy, effeminate gay male is disappearing to be replaced by gay men on a spectrum of masculinities. However, these gay men lack diversity in other ways. Representations of white, gay, affluent males are

more prevalent (81% of LGBT characters on Broadcast TV, 2010-2011), and there are very few examples of Black, Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, or Aboriginal gay men currently on television; a broad representation of lesbian or trans-identified characters is also lacking (GLAD, 2010). As far back as 1986 Joseph Beam articulated these same concerns within the realm of gay culture (not popular culture) with regards to periodicals, magazines, and even pornography. He declared, "Very clearly, gay male means: white, middle-class, youthful, Nautilized, and probably butch, [and] there is no room for Black gay men within the confines of this gay pentagon" (p. 14). Clearly society, or TV networks and advertisers, are still more comfortable with white gay men who challenge the status quo in only small ways. Both class and race in this example are represented; it is difficult to name a working class rural gay character currently on television or, for that matter, one that is not white.

In the space of popular culture it seems being gay and white is becoming more accepted, but there are glaring omissions. Critically questioning who is being excluded and underrepresented is paramount to understanding queer in the context of culture(s). For queer youth growing up in rural communities critically questioning these popular cultural discrepancies may prove useful in coming to better understand place and space in the project of developing agency. For queer bodies in rural space, the local culture tends to be lacking in diversity—especially with regard to a diversity of queer identities—and popular culture can be construed as an extension or reflection of this monoculture. Put another way, TV has a limited range of acceptability, and my rural community has a limited

range of acceptability. Therefore what I am feeling, doing, and perhaps being, is deemed pathological and unacceptable.

Popular culture exists and is enacted within the local space, but it is externally driven and controlled. I will explore the context of local rural culture in delaying the development of queer identities using closeted gay men in the community as a case study. Men who are straight identified but engage in homosexual acts while maintaining homophobic attitudes and exhibiting repugnant homophobia within the community inhibit the legitimacy of queers in the community; they further delegitimize queerness as something that is shameful and immoral (Segwick, 2008). This behaviour is not atypical but it can be devastating in a rural context as rumours fly, word travels, and the negativity continues to simmer long after reaching a boiling point. Being exposed to this type of cultural homophobia induces self-hatred in a queer body, especially before coming out. Being exposed to these rumours and accusations growing up meant that I constructed a clear message of the unacceptability of being gay in my rural community. My experience illustrates the interplay among gender, sexuality, culture, community, homophobia, and heteronormativity in the context of the rural space. Yet it is just one example of the multi-layered, multi-dimensional complexity of diverse subjectivities and relationships in rural settings. The rural focus of my research further explores these intersections within a project of exploring the development of agency for queer people, thereby improving the social and cultural conditions for SGM youth.

Identity construction: intersecting subjectivities. I experienced both aforementioned examples—popular culture's construction of the gay male and negative rumours associated with closeted men in the rural space engaging in homosexual acts—while growing up in the rural north. I am certain many others would likely empathize with my experiences. These are merely two examples of the intersections of culture (popular culture and local culture) and queer. Exploring the variety of intersecting subjectivities thoroughly would make for a lifetime of work, and, in the end, the work would still not be exhaustive. In a poststructural framework, identity development as a construction—including sexual and gender identity construction—is neither static nor complete; it is an ongoing process of negotiating power structures and relationships.

For a queer person this process looks different because of the institutional and historically homophobic and transphobic power structures at play. Seidman (1993) posits, "As individuals we know what it means to be treated as different, to be rendered as a deviant other by folk and expert cultures, and to approach our bodies, desires, and identities with a deliberateness often lacking in mainstream straight society" (p. 105). As such, identity construction of the queer body needs to contest and transgress a heteronormative paradigm. However, this is not enough. As Grace, Hill, Johnson, and Lewis (2004) point out, this involves expanding queer and "thinking/doing Queer against the tensions raised even by the conceptualization of Queer itself, [which] allows u/s to question the hidden assumptions undergirding the legitimacy of power relations, particularly as they relate to knowledge and truth" (p. 319). By queering queer, issues around power

(and histories of) can be explored and challenged. Exploring issues of identity and location (e.g. rural spaces), along with any number of other subjectivities, is an ongoing iterative project of engendering agency.

In a rural context the concept of agency and the process in which one achieves agency may be conceived as very different than in the urban setting. So, how can we leverage Queer Theory to conceptualize agency for queer bodies in different lived spaces? It is perhaps hopeful that, as Irvine (1996) points out, "cultures cannot be understood simply as a static and historically consistent aggregate of shared practices or knowledge. Rather they are dynamic processes which, as Clifford notes, 'do not hold still for their portraits'" (p. 228). The cultures of rural communities, though slow to respond to changes, do shift, morph, and evolve in their attitudes and range of acceptance. While my hometown may have once been inhospitable for new immigrants, there are now community groups who are deeply involved in community activities. Where there is hope that time will heal all wounds, some of us are impatient and wish to prevent the wounds from ever being inflicted.

Concluding Remarks

Being queer presents challenges and choices that those belonging to heteronormative society are not required to contemplate, let alone act on. Being queer in rural areas adds additional complexity with respect to location, class, access, diversity, programming, and supports. The queer body in the rural space is subjected to a sort of isolation within isolation; physical isolation in terms of

geography and psychological isolation in terms of becoming possible as a queer person within that space. As presented, Queer Theory provides a framework with which we can begin to mediate such isolation and critically investigate the intersections of subjectivities, location, and self.

With firm roots in the Feminist Movement, Queer Theory creates space for a spectrum of differently identified individuals to join in a common chorus contesting heterosexism, heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia. In the space of rural life, I have proposed Queer Theory as a useful theoretical framework useful to politicize the struggles of queer bodies in that space, to create a project of challenging conceptions of identity, and to envision agency as a queer subject.

Queer Theory is well suited to contest the challenges presented by the rural space in the project of politicizing queer. In the postfoundational tradition, Queer Theory rejects societal constructions of normativity and performativity in favour of promoting non-essentialist thought and individual agency. As Butler (2004) points out, this denial of norms is problematic: "We see the 'norm' as that which binds us, but we also see that the 'norm' creates unity only through a strategy of exclusion" (p. 206). So perhaps the ultimate goal of queer is to transgress and transform by queering institutions, queering communities, queering society. By make queer the norm, the norm becomes no longer exclusionary.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Purpose and Objectives of Research

It is important that schools act swiftly to make changes protecting sexual and gender minority (SGM) students. Among a variety of ethical and moral reasons it may simply come down to life or death. Lipkin (2004) indicates that gay youth are over three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts and that "in light of these finding, the schools' lack of attention to gay youth suicide prevention is alarming" (p. 56). In order to combat sexual and gender minority youth suicides, the cultures of schools must change to become more accepting and inclusive of sexual and gender minorities. For these changes to occur, a deep understanding of the social and cultural conditions for these minorities is required.

Inclusivity of all students regardless of sex, culture, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation or gender identity is paramount to the creation of safe and caring schools (http://education.alberta.ca/teachers/safeschools.aspx). Kissen (2002) contends that if a school situation is characterized as bad for even one SGM student then "the schools are not the safe havens for learning that they claim they are striving to be" (p. 29). According to Lipkin (2006), the "initial objectives [of school programming] should be tolerance, support, and inclusion [due to the] levels of

glbt[6] student harassment, their invisibility in school culture, and their curricular omission" (p. 117). My thesis research explores factors that have either prevented, delayed or obstructed the creation of inclusive school environments for sexual and gender minorities in the Battle River School Division (BRSD). It also investigates those factors that have encouraged, fostered, or supported the creation of inclusive spaces. By doing so, the goal of my research is to come to a better understanding of the social and cultural conditions that exist in the BRSD for sexual and gender minority students from the perspectives of educators working in the district.

Considerable research has been conducted into sexual minorities and matters of gender identity in schools; however, most of this research does not take into account the unique context of rural communities (see Chapter 3). Especially marginalized in academic scholarship have been the perspectives of educators in the rural space. The purpose of my research is to provide a snapshot of educators' insights, observations, and opinions regarding the social and cultural conditions for SGM students and issues in the BRSD and local community outside the classroom. One goal of the research is to raise the critical consciousness of participants, which may result in positive changes in schools for rural SGM students. The findings of the research ultimately look to bringing awareness to an understudied population.

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[6] Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual, Trans-identified/Transgendered

Study Snapshot

As noted, my research is grounded in queer theory, which is situated within a poststructural feminist framework (see Chapter 3). This epistemology is concerned with critically questioning and analyzing cultural and historical omissions, marginalization, and the uncovering of hegemony. Through a queer lens, the analysis examines how rural teachers work to transgress heterosexism, homophobia and transphobia in schools.

Through a focus group process (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005; Madriz, 2000; Mertens, 2005; Moss, 2007), six educators from the Battle River School Division were asked to share their stores, experiences, and perspectives regarding sexual and gender minority youth in their schools and communities. They reflected on the social and cultural conditions of the past, and the changes that have transpired in recent years. They also envisioned ways that could further the rights and safety of their sexual and gender minority students in their schools and communities.

Ethics Review Process

Research conducted using human subjects at the University of Alberta requires ethics approval to proceed. My ethics application was submitted via Human Research Ethics Online (HERO), which is run by the Office of the Vice-President (Research) on December 8, 2011. The application contained the study's objectives and design, risk assessment, benefits analysis, recruitment procedures, the methods that would be applied to ensure informed consent, an

outline of participant information to be collected, the measures that would be taken to ensure data confidentiality, and associated documentation (see Appendix A-C). I received ethics approval on January 11, 2012.

Sampling

Participant Requirements

In Smith and Zantiotis' (1989) discussion of teacher education, they posit that the relationship of public schools, culture, and society must be interrogated; that "transformation is both a visionary project and praxis" (p. 116). It was vital that my research participants could not only report on 'what is,' but could also critically question 'what could be' when reflecting on policy and practice with regards to sexual and gender minority issues. I took this into account when configuring my approach to research sampling.

In my participant recruitment advertisement I asked, "Are you a teacher concerned with the health and wellbeing of your sexual-minority students?" and "Is making the classroom an inclusive space for gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, trans-identified, two-spirit, queer and questioning students important to you?" (Appendix A). The final question on the recruitment advertisement asked "Have you being teaching in the community for 2+ years?" (Appendix A). Because the research looked to expose the social and cultural conditions for sexual minorities, the participant must have been in the community for a minimum of 2 years in order to be able to speak with some fluency to its past and current outlook. Moreover, having spent considerable time working in the community

suggests that participants would be more likely to remain in the community and could envision what the future might hold for sexual and gender minorities as well as what transformational changes they could affect.

Sampling Procedure

In order to locate research participants I approached Nancy, a personal contact who works in the BRSD board office. I was familiar with the some of the work she had done in that district to further the rights and safety of sexual and gender minority students. As an out lesbian I knew she was queer friendly and thusly provided her with an overview of the research and asked if there was a district newsletter or list-serve that could be used to advertise for study participants. Due to her role in the district and the sensitive nature of the research she felt it was appropriate to consult the superintendent and let him make the decision as to whether or not to assist in my research. He was amenable and requested that I send the research advertisement so he could distribute it to staff. I sent it immediately but, after several days, had not heard back. After some investigation we discovered that the BRSD's email system was blocking my messages due to the inclusion of the word "lesbian," which would activate an email filter and prevent it from being delivered. Once the district's technology department had sorted the email filtering issues, the superintendent sent an email containing my request for participants to district staff (Appendix A). Subsequently, and of her own volition, Nancy forwarded the superintendent's email message to various teachers, administrators, and counselors in the district

whom she felt might be interested in the study and that she knew to be allies of the queer community. While the intention was that participants would self-select based on the advertisement, research participants were inadvertently identified primarily through snowball, or chain sampling; my key 'informant' identified other individuals who held similar views and felt strongly about equality in the classroom for SGM students (Mertens, 2005).

Participants expressed their interest in the study through email and, having met the criteria, were given a letter of introduction (Appendix B) that I also reviewed verbally at the beginning of the first focus group. Participants signed a consent form (Appendix B), which was either scanned and emailed or given to me in person. Participants were informed that they had the ability to withdraw from the study at any point until member checks were completed.

Method

Epistemological Foundation

While traditional quantitative research methods have historically been applied to marginalized groups, such methods have prevented the voices of individuals from being heard and have failed to adequately reflect or represent shared group/community experiences (Madriz, 2000). The research method applied for the course of this research was focus groups as they are congruent with the goals and outcomes of a queer epistemology. In spite of little being written about the use of focus groups for research based in a queer paradigm, focus groups are an appropriate method for a variety of reasons. Perhaps most

importantly, focus groups have a considerable record of being applied in the context of feminist participatory action research projects (Moss, 2007); as queer theory is born out of post-structural feminism many of the underlying principles around equality and social justice promotion by and with the community are similarly applicable. Focus group interaction is both vertical (interviewer-participants) and horizontal (between participants) which reduces top down researcher influence and permits participants to mold and shape the conversation (Madriz, 2000). Focus groups are queer in this way as the discussions that emerge though the process are grassroots community-based stories, insights, and recommendations. Focus groups also reduce interviewer influence by reducing direct interaction with the participant thereby creating an equitable space to share, reflect, and validate their understandings of culture and place and making it possible for participants to engage in the process of "writing culture together" (Madriz, 2000, p. 836).

Built into a queer theoretical design is the notion that social action—in the service of transgressing homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormative assumptions—is encouraged not only by the results of the research, but also by the research process itself. In order to encourage transformational change, it was vital that focus group members have similar a desire for positive outcomes for sexual and gender minorities in schools. As Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) relate:

> Focus groups foreground and exploit the power of testimony and voice, [and] they can become sites for the overdetermination of collective

> identity as strategic political practice. This overdetermination creates a critical mass of visible solidarity that seems to be a necessary first step toward social and political change. (p. 898)

By the seemingly simple act of putting people with similar beliefs and goals in the same room and having a discussion, Kamberelis and Dimitriadis suggest that action is made possible; focus groups do just that.

Choosing focus groups for a research method can also be problematic in that it is relatively new in the realm of qualitative research. Madriz contends, "Existing information regarding focus groups is not only scare but unsystematic" (2000, p. 836). Still in reviewing research methods I found no other tool that would adequately delve into community and school issues around SGM needs while maintaining the possibility of prolonged social action as a result. Therefore I choose focus groups as a method because I wanted the possibility of research that is transformative and where social change is a key outcome. Focus groups align with my ambition because they allow the plural voices of the Other to be heard and shared (Butler, 1993). In this case the Other are self-identified educator participants who have acknowledged a deficit in their own schools around SGM belonging and safety and wish to make a difference in the lives of their SGM students.

Identifying the Research Location

Once I received ethics approval I began my search for a rural community in which to conduct the research. The rural location selected had to be

geographically close enough that I could drive to it, for pragmatic reasons, and yet far enough removed from the direct influence of Edmonton, the second largest city in Alberta, with over one million people in the metro area (Statistics Canada, 2012). The Battle River School Division (BRSD) contains 19 communities consisting of 37 schools with the Board Office centered in Camrose, Alberta (Battle River School Division, n. d.). While the definition of rural varies greatly, in contrast with the urban center of Edmonton, approximately one hour away, it is most certainly a rural space with its own unique culture and character. As outlined in the sampling section, I established contact with a personal acquaintance, Nancy, in BRSD who was able to assist me in finding participants for the research. I proceeded to then organize a focus group time that was amenable to all participants.

Research Process

Focus group overview. Two focus groups were conducted with the same six participants. As indicated, focus groups were utilized in order to minimize the power of the researcher and maximizing the power of collective thought in reporting and brainstorming. The framework for establishing and conducting the focus groups drew on the work of Mertens (2005), Madriz (2000), and Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005). Focus group participants were encouraged to engage in a cooperative inquiry process in order to minimize power relations between the researcher and participants (Merten, 2005).

Location for the focus group. For individuals to feel at ease and ready to share through the course of the focus group, special consideration was given to the focus group location (Madriz, 2000). Because participants may have been sensitive to the research subject matter, I did not feel it would be appropriate to conduct the research in the school setting where participants' peers or students might be around, thereby opening them to the possibility of being questioned about their involvement in the focus group. Participants were removed from their environment allowing them to reflect on the space and conditions within it. I identified two possible options, renting a conference room or finding a safe residence to conduct the focus groups in. In the end my personal contact Nancy, whom had liaised with the district superintendent, was kind enough to offer her home to be the location for the focus groups. Her large comfortable living room allowed the participants to relax in the comforts of home while drinking tea and snaking on treats that Nancy had kindly provided. As is often the case in small communities and closed systems such as a school district, most of the participants had been to Nancy's house previously and if they had not they were still well acquainted with her. Before the focus group began the participants consented to having Nancy remain in the room. She was outside the circle of conversation and non-contributing, but everyone was amenable to her presence. With the work she had done in the school district around SGM rights and safety, she too was interested in the discussion. It proved very useful to have her present as, once the participants left, she was able to provide additional context into some of the histories and recent changes that had occurred with regards to sexual

and gender minorities in the district. As an out lesbian who has lived and worked in the community for many years Nancy was very helpful in teasing out some of the themes which I would present for the second focus group as well.

Focus group one process. Research participants committed to being part of two semi-structured focus groups. Focus groups were audio recorded using a boardroom microphone attached to a laptop. The first focus group was conducted on February 2, 2012 from 19:00-20:00. I began by reviewing the *Invitation and Letter of Consent for Research Participants* (see Appendix B). I ensured that I had all the participants signatures as well as Nancy's since she was privy to the discussion. I first introduced myself and then I introduced the research process by telling the participants:

> The research is framed from a queer theoretical lens. Queer theory, if you're not familiar with it, was born out of post-structural feminism and the idea, the very simplified idea behind it, is that the community has this knowledge, and that we can use this knowledge if we actually listen to the community…. So the goal will be to uncover successes and struggles within the [sexual and gender minority] community.

Madriz (2000) stresses the importance of making the background of the researcher and rationale for the approach explicit. It was vital that participants understood the rationale for using focus groups and what the goal of the study was. I went on to say:

> Okay, in the first focus group we are going to talk about culture, the climate, the conditions, stories about parents, about students, about other

> administrators, about other teachers. I want to hear what it's like in the schools for your sexual minority students. For the second focus group I want you to take some time and think about what happened in this focus group. Go back to school tomorrow and open your ears listen, look around, maybe have some conversations. Same thing on Monday. Same thing on Tuesday. Tuesday night we'll come back here and the idea is that perhaps we will have brainstormed some ways that can affect some change that we can make a difference in the community. So that's my spiel about what's going to happen.

By situating what would take place in each of the focus groups and outlining what the participants would be responsible for contributing, I set the stage for the focus group thereby hopefully easing their concerns and giving them a broad picture of the research expectations. Literature concerning feminist participatory action research using focus groups cautioned researchers not to go into too great depth with questions, that statements or short open-ended questions are preferred (Madriz, 2000; Allen, 2006; Kitzinger, 2005). It was my goal to have participants collectively come to new understanding of the spaces they worked through dialogue. I finished the introduction and started the focus group participation by staying:

> So that's about it, I guess we can start. If anybody wants to jump in at any point… How would you describe the climate in your school or community for sexual minority students?

With that, the focus group began and lasted one hour.

Focus group two process. On the weekend between focus group one and focus group two I sent an email reviewing some of the themes identified from the first focus group, statistics from Egale's Canada's *Every Class in Every School: The First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian schools* (Taylor et al., 2011), and questions to consider in preparation for the second focus group (Appendix D). Having a second focus group with the same participants gave them the opportunity to reflect on their practice and critically assess possible changes for their schools and community in order to improve the conditions for sexual and gender minority students.

The second focus group took place on February 7, 2012, from 18:00-19:00. Once everyone had arrived I began the recording. I reviewed the steps that would be taken to ensure confidentiality and explained the member checks process. From there the participants guided the conversation with only the occasional prompt or clarification question or comment from me. The second focus group also lasted one hour.

There was a noticeable shift in the dynamic between focus group one and two. The participants seemed more comfortable not only with each other and the situation, but in particular with the subject matter. In the intervening days between the two focus groups participants, language around sexual and gender minority issues and people seemed to have solidified considerably. They communicated their concerns and desires for changes with greater ease.

Mertens (2005) contends that focus groups give researchers the opportunity to combine both observation and interaction in collecting qualitative research data. My role as researcher shifted between the two sessions, having had considerable interaction in the first focus group to becoming more of an observer in the second focus group. The participants effectively took collective control of the second focus group by leading the course of the discussion with only an occasional prompt or clarification from me.

Confidentiality, transcriptions and participant follow up.

Confidentiality and privacy were maintained throughout the research process. The focus groups were digitally recorded directly to my personal password protected computer. The digital audio files were also password protected. An off-site backup of the audio file was generated and the same security measures were applied. The focus group audio files were sent securely to the transcriptionist once she had filled out and signed the *Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement* (see Appendix C). Once the focus groups were successfully transcribed in Microsoft Word format, the backup was deleted and the transcriptionist provided verbal confirmation that her copies of the audio files had also been deleted. All written documents completed by participants were stored in a locked cabinet at my residence to ensure they remained confidential and private.

Member checks were sent to participants on Wednesday, March 21, 2012. All identifying information had been removed from the transcriptions and replaced with numbers. Each participant was notified of their participant number

and instructed to add, edit, and/or delete their contributions as they felt was necessary. Participants were given a deadline of April 25th to return the member checks with tracked changes. Member checks served to validate the data by ensuring that the transcriptions were faithful to their experiences and opinions. They were also given the opportunity to specify a desired pseudonym. A master list containing participant numbers, names, identifying information, and pseudonyms has been kept on my personal password protected computer. Data will be kept on my password-protected computer for the minimum required 5 years. Establishing digital off-site cloud-based encrypted back-ups has ensured data redundancy. After 5 years the primary data and backups will be securely deleted.

Chapter 5: Data Presentation and Analysis

There has historically tended to be an underrepresentation of queer individuals in educational research (Atkinson, 2004). Atkinson (2004) contends that queer studies have been considered "frivolous" and "unimportant" in the eyes of the establishment until very recently (p. 597). Castell and Bryson (1998) indicate they have often "been troubled by the absence or invisibility of lesbian students, teachers, administrators, and, indeed, researchers in educational research accounts" (p. 245). They go on indicating that "only heterosexual or faux-heterosexual people are usually welcome to do school-based educational research" (p. 247). With greater acceptance of queer studies in recent years, it becomes all the more important that sexual and gender minorities are included explicitly in educational research. In the context of this research I have focused on the rural spaces where sexual and gender minority (SGM) persons often struggle to find voice.

Research Overview

Six participants from the Battle River School Division (BRSD) were selected to take part in this research. All but one participant represented schools in the city of Camrose which, according to the 2011 census, had a population of 17,386 (Statistics Canada, 2011). The research data was collected using two one-hour focus groups that occured on February 2, 2012 and February 7, 2012. Participants had the option of choosing a pseudonym during the member check

phase. If a pseudonym was not specified then I used one in order to maintain research participant anonymity. The participants will herein be referred to by the following pseudonyms, Tim, Sarah, Lynn, MT, Eric, and Alice**.**

Participants

In order to qualify to be in this study, participants were required to have been living and teaching in the community for a minimum of two years. The individual with the least time in the community was Sarah who had been teaching in the district for seven years. At the time of the study she was 31 years old and working as a learning facilitator and inclusive education teacher in a K-6 school. At the other end of the spectrum was Lynn who had been working in the district for 30 years. Lynn works as a guidance councilor and teacher in a 7-12 school with approximately 200 students in a small town near Camrose. Rounding out the female participants in the study was Alice, a 55-year-old K-6 school administrator with 20 plus years working in the district. The three male participants included a high school vice-principal, Tim, who was 49 with 11 years in the district; MT, a counselor who was 48 with 17 years in the district; and Eric, a K-6 English and French immersion teacher who was 43 and had been in the district for 20 years. Eric self-identified as gay during the course of the focus groups; no other participant indicated their sexuality or gender identity through the course of the two focus groups.

Themes

Primary data analysis occurred during and immediately after data collection (Mertens, 2005). General themes were identified through the first focus group and were further explored in the subsequent focus group. Additional primary analysis was conducted once the data collection was completed. As recommended by Silverman (2000), the focus group recordings were reviewed multiple times and anecdotal notes were produced. Mertens (2005) suggests that a period of a month or more should pass between primary and secondary analysis in order to gain "fresh perspective on the nature of the data and the problems" (p. 421). Second level analysis was conducted once the transcriptions had been completed, approximately two months after the data had been collected. Following the steps outline by Hahn (2008) I proceeded to code the transcriptions in Microsoft Word. Level 1 coding identified general themes directly addressing the social and cultural conditions of SGM students in the BRSD. Level 2 coding further refined the data allowing me to categorize participant contributions into three distinct categories; top-down changes, grassroots changes and barriers to improving the social and cultural conditions of SGM students.

In reviewing the transcripts, the general tone of the first focus group was that the conditions for sexual and gender minorities in the district *have improved*. The tone shifted in the second focus group, with participants reporting that the conditions for sexual and gender minorities in the their schools *were improving*. While many positive changes within the community and school community were

reported, on further reflection the participants identified that there were still places and spaces that sexual and gender minorities might feel unsafe and not included in the school or community. Many of the positive changes that have occurred in the BRSD, for example the creation of a QSA (queer straight alliance) and encouraging inclusive language use, are consistent with what the literature outlines as being useful in creating inclusive spaces for sexual and gender minority youth (see Chapter 2; section, Queer Research in the Classroom). The focus groups helped solidify how those changes and others have affected the culture of classrooms, schools, and the community for SGM students.

The focus groups revealed that improved conditions for sexual and gender minorities have come from a variety of places and initiatives in the BRSD. I have categorized these changes as either top-down or grassroots bottom-up approaches. The participants also identified barriers to change both in schools and in the community that have impeded improving the social and culture conditions of SGM students. Queer theory is useful in deconstructing these barriers as sites of queer marginalization and permits us to better understand how SGM youth and allied educators might take action to transgress homophobia, transphobia and heteronormativity in these spaces. Through the narratives of the participants, a glimpse of the culture in the rural space for SGM that the BRSD occupies is afforded. In addition, the participants' stories and reflections provide a snapshot of some of the various ways that the cultures of the community and schools intersect for sexual minorities.

Social and Cultural Conditions for SGM youth in the Battle River School Divison in 2012

The first focus group began by participants reflecting on the current conditions for SGM youth in their school schools and communities. There have been considerable changes that have improved the conditions for many SGM persons within the community, but youth are still marginalized and occupy often unsafe spaces as a condition of location. Sarah maintained:

> I believe that we are making progress, but I really don't think that we're anywhere near where we need to be in Camrose or in surrounding communities. The majority of us are in Camrose feeding into the Comp [Camrose Composite High School (CCHS)] so we see a little glimmer of hope. [However, I] have taught in a number of the outlying schools and I don't feel that they have been safe places for sexual minority students…. I am not convinced that in rural Alberta, where we and where our division is, that it's safe, division-wide, for our students to be openly queer.

Despite this, positive changes have not gone unnoticed. MT spoke about the changes he has seen in the school community in recent years since returning to the composite high school: "Some students are openly queer and acceptance of those kids in the last few years has been remarkable…. I think if we had rewound 15 years it would have been a much different response from the school population." Lynn echoed MT's sentiments on the changes that have taken place

in the community and district. Changes have been seen not only at the high school level, but also in her community. Lynn, who has been in school for 30 years, shared that in recent years she has seen a change in the school culture and acceptance of SGM students, "I see us in transition changing to a better more caring place." A tone of positive change in the lives of SGM students was reflected throughout the focus group members' narratives.

Alice has lived and worked her entire life in the area. She attended the Camrose Composite High School (CCHS) as a youth and her children attended CCHS as well. She spoke to the challenges her children faced growing up in the community, attending elementary school at one of the smallest schools in the BRSD.

> They really felt that like, good lord like it's a cookie cutter kind of thing, and they knew they didn't fit in the cutter at all. That was very awkward for them and it was very freeing for them when they came to high school and they could be out of the cutter.

Once her children moved to high school, things improved but it was still not a place that her daughter, who has since came out as bisexual, was able to fully express herself and share her sexuality in the community. It not until she left the community and came back that she was able to come out to her family. Alice reflected on how these conditions affected her own children as well as the students she has taught in her years in the district: "I've taught children who are gay and were not able to have same gender people come with them to grad, like they didn't feel that they could." With all the changes that have transpired in

recent years she said she's "just so proud of what's happened now." She was hopeful for the future, but wished that the high school could have been where it is now with regards to SGM inclusivity 10 years ago when her daughter was attending the school. Her hope for the future was clear and she was excited about the changing nature of the community, not only for SGM youth, but also for everyone that does not fit the heteronormative cookie cutter status quo.

> I have really been thinking about how our community has changed from a predominantly Caucasian, heterosexual, church-going, two-parent family community, to looking at how there's actually people of colour, people of different orientations or backgrounds, different cultures that we've come from, [and] languages thank god. Mon dieu!

Alice's reflections were particularly impactful. She has witnessed firsthand the changes that have come for SGM youth in several schools and in the community. In spite of a love of and pride for the area, the conditions that existed in the past were a barrier for her daughter and family. Now she is hopeful that SGM students are growing up in the BRSD in a more caring and safe place.

While the changes in the BRSD are apparent, with the creation of a QSA, safe spaces, and special celebrations like purple shirt day (in honour of those who have committed suicide), there is still much work to be done. Tim succinctly summarized the social and cultural conditions in the BRSD saying, "We're further along than we were, but I wouldn't say for one moment that we've arrived."

Top-down Changes in the BRSD

Changes that have improved the lives and wellbeing of SGM students in the BRSD have come from many places. To this end, the participants identified several initiatives and practices that they and their colleagues have enacted within their school communities. Some of the changes in recent years concern modeling inclusive language use, having out staff members, improving the school community through community leadership, inclusion of SGM perspectives through classroom practice, having a visionary and supportive administration, creating safe spaces, and establishing a school wide inclusivity event.

Challenging language use. Participants spoke at length regarding the concerted effort by many educators in the district to address and curb pejorative language use (e.g. fag, queer, dyke, gay). Lynn reported that derogatory term usage has decreased in her school and that staff was actively working to further reduce such language. MT suggested that changing the culture of acceptable language being used in the schools required vigilance on the part educators. MT added that being a good role model was "like practice" with the "hope that it would be part of our repertoire." Change being modelled and enforced by teachers was seen as paramount to changing the culture of the school to make it more inclusive and caring of SGM students. It was also acknowledged that changing the vocabulary in the school setting resonates in the home and extends to the community. Sarah asserted:

> Appropriate language use has become an essential part of our jobs as educators. Language use at home for many students would not be acceptable in our buildings. The use of derogatory terms used around the kitchen table occurs often. I would argue that we need to change those table conversations, and we can start by changing the acceptable language use at school.

Throughout the focus group process the home environment was brought up often. It was suggested that instilling appropriate language in students could enable them to become agents of change simply through the words they applied inside the classroom and beyond.

Alice, an elementary school principal, believed it was important to go beyond correcting students' use of pejorative terms; that making the school setting more inclusive meant using inclusive language around issues of gender, sexual orientations, and traditional heteronormative constructions. For example, Alice highlighted her approach to using inclusive language regarding the composition of the family. Rather than saying "your mom and dad" she now says "your family." She has found this approach more inclusive of mixed gender, same gender, and transgendered couples, but also for those children living with grandparents and in other guardian arrangements. Both Alice and Eric emphasized the importance of modeling inclusive language and correcting the privileging of language starting in elementary school.

Out staff in the school. While only a few examples were reported, the top-down effect of having staff members who were out in the school setting was

reported to set a positive tone, challenging and changing the beliefs of both staff and students. Ahmed (2000) suggests that it is "the recognition of the other that is central to the constitution of the subject" (p. 24). The act of recognizing that others exist within a given space allows those bodies to be constructed as real subjects, worthy of understanding and compassion. Alice's lived experiences reflect this notion: "One of the thing's that has been a change agent in a really quiet way is people knowing people…[and having] lives touched [by people] who are gay;" by "having staff members who have been very honest with their own staff about where they're at has helped build tolerance and understanding." Eric, who identified as gay in the course of the focus groups said, "Often my work is just to try to be a good role model." He echoed Alice's sentiments, stating:

> I think having positive gay role models in the school is really important…I am out to my staff and they are very accepting. That's really wonderful and they know I have a partner and they're very welcoming.

Having teachers who are publicly out positively affects the SGM students by providing them with someone who is safe and who can empathize with coming to understand their sexuality and place in the world (Harbeck, 1992). Sarah illustrated how gay role models in the school can positively influence non-queer identified students as well.

> Having positive gay role models is really important….I have a student whose mom just came out over the last year and that's been challenging

> for him. His parents are divorced, his mom was with another man and so to him all of his life his mom has been straight. He came home one day to find his mom with her girlfriend and her girlfriend has now moved in. That has been really challenging for him and yet when I have conversations with him his response is that he wouldn't necessarily chose that for his mom and that's her choice but he's thankful that he had a teacher in a previous school who was gay that he can identify with and he loved his teacher. So for him, that's a safe place it was okay for his mom because he had that experience with a teacher that he felt connected with.

While the participants acknowledged that hiring teachers simply based on their sexual orientation or gender identity might be unethical, an environment that included and was inclusive of SMG educators created a more complete and welcoming school environment in their experience.

Community-based leadership. Participants identified a unique voice of resistance in the community who has advocated for community acceptance of SGM people and lobbied against homophobic bullying. Berdie Fowler's name came up repeatedly in the course of the focus groups as an individual who has had a positive impact in changing the culture of the community for SGM individuals. Berdie was born in Bittern Lake, Alberta, a rural community outside of Camrose, in 1920 (Epp, 2008). In 1952 Berdie and her husband founded the Camrose Booster and in 2012, at 92 years old, she is still the editor in addition to writing a weekly column (Epp, 2008). The participants reflected on how, on more than one occasion, she has used her position in the media to address issues

around SGM people. Eric provided an illustration of one of the ways she showed leadership in this way:

> A couple years ago there was a series of letters to the editor from people in the community you know debating about homosexuality….It was quite ongoing, every week there were responses…. It had gone on for quite a while and then…Birdie Fowler wrote an editorial about how she felt it was important to stop this because she recognized that the [dialogue] had gotten to the [stage of] rhetoric had gotten to the point where people in the community were starting to sense that it was becoming very offensive…. She thought it shouldn't continue because that wasn't the purpose of the forum really…. I think that that was very responsible because she is kind of the doyenne of the local newspaper here. It was another good example of leadership where you see someone like that taking a stance. It really makes people stop and consider it carefully.

As recently as November 2011 Berdie wrote an op-ed column about homophobic bullying, stating:

> Society has a collective duty to eliminate bullying. To achieve that we have to be *open to learning* more about sexual orientation – even those who have spent a lifetime thinking that to be non-heterosexual is immoral….May we be open to learning and at least agree that bullying, homophobic or other, must stop. Each of us can be an influence to make it happen; governments and schools can't do it without a supportive cultural ethos in the community.

MT reflected, “It’s pretty bold of her to make that presentation and to have her as a sort of a matriarchal spokesperson make a statement like [that].” As a community leader she has asserted her influence, which did not go un-noticed. Berdie’s leadership role illustrates the unique interplay of the culture of the community and how that has a ripple affect on and within schools and educators.

Lynn provided another, perhaps less obvious example of individuals in the community affecting change in the school when she shared that the chair of her school’s parent council is transgendered. Having this person in a leadership role in the school community allowed educators, students, and other parents to come to know and accept this diversity that they may not have otherwise been confronted with.

Inclusion of SGM perspectives throughout classroom practice. Curriculum is central to how students come to understand their histories, their worlds, and themselves (Giroux, 1992; Pinar, 1998). Making meaning based on who is included, rather than excluded, allows for the maintenance of a homogeneous culture. The participants identified that explicit inclusion of SGM issues in the curriculum was almost non-existent. This begs the question: How can students come to know and understand themselves and their place in the world if they do not see themselves represented in it? The one curricular exception where there was limited SGM representation was in CALM (Career and Life Management). MT indicated that there is some introduction to SMG issues in CALM and that “it becomes part of the conversation for many of the classes.” Unfortunately, as MT pointed out, much of what students were exposed

to was dependant on the teacher: “With me I’ve got...the safe space poster in my class and I talk about why that’s there.…I introduce that at the beginning of the class when we start to teach, so the kids know that it’s something that’s fair game and is open for conversation.” MT also mentioned that the Sexual Health Coordinator from Alberta Health Services is brought in as a guest speaker and that she does an “awesome job about being gender neutral in [her] presentation and talking about [sexual] activity between people.” Other participants commended her and highlighted her as an important resource in the school community.

In addition to CALM Tim suggested that Social Studies offered many opportunities to engage in discussions on SGM issues but that, as indicated, it was not contained explicitly within the Alberta program of studies. Alice reported that challenging gender norms and expectations could be enacted outside of the curriculum in the classroom by challenging engrained practices. She illustrated how a small change in teaching partnered dance during physical education could make a big difference:

> In the old days it would always be ‘girls and guys pair up,’ and you don’t often hear that kind of talk anymore, it’s kind of like ‘get a partner, let’s dance.’ And I really like that. You know [it’s] very subtle, but it’s changing things.

While examples of curricular inclusion of SGM were intermittent at best, the participants hit on a few ways in which educators could gently improve the social and cultural conditions for SGM students. This meant infusing SGM

perspectives throughout classroom practice, permitting SGM students within the school culture to see themselves reflected in ways of knowing and behaving.

Administration's role in changing culture. Perhaps more than any other change, the participants reflected on the importance of having a supportive, if not visionary, administrator (or administrative team). Tim stated that "to provide safe havens for all of our kids is so dependant on the perspective of the leadership and how they view their role." In CCHS the leadership has made it a priority to support SGM students. MT pointed out, "From an administrative level it didn't take very long in the conversation to be like, 'well the right decision is fairly obvious: it's kids and human rights and human dignity.'" Tim further highlighted the importance that the administration has played in supporting SGM students:

> I ultimately believe it [the QSA] was accepted within the community, because of his [the principal's] acceptance within the community…. if he says it's a go they trust him and that's why I do believe there wasn't a backlash like there could have been and he took it all on….I give him credit cause I think he was as scared as the rest of us.

In this example the connection between the culture of the community and the culture of the school is explicit. The influence of an administrator extended beyond the school walls even if the power to affect direct change was only apparent within the school.

Alice identified an initiative at her school that aims to make the school culture more inclusive of all people by getting everyone working at the school on

the same policy page and working towards common goals. To this end all staff, support staff, and teaching staff are included in school meetings. She posits:

> I think we are change agents. You know we aren't hired to be the status quo and that may have some people feeling up in arms a bit, like you know, 'I didn't hire on to be a change agent. I just like to teach children how to read.' But the fact of the matter is … we need to be on the edge of having our students know that there's another way of doing this.

Having all staff attend meetings builds cohesion within the staff and furthers the goal of providing consistency to the student body in a variety of areas including inclusive language and behaviour around gender and acceptance of SGM differences.

Safe spaces in schools. Placing safe-space signs and posters outside of offices, classrooms, and meeting spaces was identified as one of the top-down ways that educators can, and have, communicated to the SGM school population that there are safe spaces for them. In his role as a counsellor, MT spoke about creating a welcoming space: "If you sit on my couch you see my desk and there's a sign there…it's pretty out there [in the open]." Alice insisted that it needed to go beyond safe *spaces*; rather the ultimate goal should be making the entire school a safe *place*:

> I think that we really want to be accepting of people and where they're at and I don't want to have us to have a tone that tolerates putting down or excluding folks for any reason…. The idea of advocacy – on a very simple, basic level – of students feeling that there are adults in the

building that they can trust, that they can go to and tell the real story and know that that's gonna be okay.

Tim provided an example of how the actions of educators communicate acceptance and set the tone in the classroom space. After having a frank classroom discussion about a sexual-minority issue, a queer student in his class began to blossom: "There's a confidence coming out of him that wasn't there before. Cause I think he went, 'this is a safe place,' like 'he's got my back.'" While it was seen as important to have identifiable safe spaces in the school where students could go, the participants also reported that through their (and colleagues') actions and words, students came to understand the culture of the spaces and whether those spaces were open to the SGM community.

Pink shirt days. The final example of top-down change identified by the participants was the district-wide Pink Shirt Day. The origin of Pink Shirt Day has its roots in Nova Scotia in 2007 when a Grade 9 student was being bullied and called pejorative terms based on his perceived sexuality because he chose to wear a pink shirt on the first day of school. Two Grade 12 students came to his defense by purchasing 50 pink shirts and enlisting their friends to wear them the following day (C.B.C. News, 2007). This grassroots action drew international media attention and has since been adopted in many districts across Canada, the BRSD being among them. The participants reported that the Pink Shirt Day has been very successful with high levels of participation across the district. Sarah suggested that, while encouraging, the work needs to go further in the future: "We have worked hard division-wide to try to have a huge day, but I

think we need to consider the next steps and how we can [be] spring-boarding from last year's Pink Shirt Day message and deepen it." While there is still work to be done, it is a positive sign that the school division has organized this event to create more inhabitable and safe spaces for SGM youth.

Grassroots Changes in the BRSD

In addition to changes in practice and policy undertaken by educators in the BRSD, participants identified bottom-up or grassroots student-based leadership initiatives that have had a positive effect on school culture for SGM students. In particular, the participants noted the creation of a GSA (Gay Straight Alliance)[7] in CCHS, students addressing staff, and purple shirt day.

Creating a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA). To their knowledge, the participants believed Camrose one of the only community in Alberta, outside of Red Deer, Edmonton, and Calgary – the three largest cities – that has a GSA. The participants credited students for being leaders in the school community by enacting some of the changes that have occurred within high school, which have resulted in an improved school culture for SGM students. One student in particular was instrumental in founding the GSA. Because he was not enrolled in CCHS, he took a single class. Then, as a member of the student body, he was able to work toward the creation of a GSA in CCHS. He and a lesbian-identified

[7] Some participants used the term QSA or Queer Straight Alliance interchangeably.

student began to lobby the staff. Tim described the day that they presented their idea for a GSA to the staff:

> What was interesting was how the adults….in the building responded when we had two great leaders come forward with our GSA…. We just were so lucky that the way they did presentations with staff just cracked it open. I just remember the day the one gal gave her presentation to our entire staff and it wasn't, it wasn't an easy day, and all I felt was now we are kind of talking on a whole other level.

MT believed that the creation of a GSA in CCHS was made possible through the students' efforts, as they had resonated deeply with school staff. The grassroots actions of the students broke down an invisible barrier within the school culture. MT posits:

> I think that's why it had the power that it did because it wasn't from an administrative perspective. It was from the people that we work for, you know. It was a student saying that this is how it's hard for me at school and this is how we can make it different and this is what we we'd like to do. She connected in such a human way that it was really powerful.

The GSA has had impact beyond the school walls. Lynn provided an example: "We had some students actually come into the comp [CCHS] to the Gay Straight Alliance meeting and they really felt empowered after that. They came back to the school and created a safe space in the school and gathered information." The reverberations of change echoed through the district and across the community. The GSA opened up a new dialogue around SGM issues

in perhaps unexpected places. Tim illustrated how information shared at a staff meeting about the GSA opened up new pockets of community-based discussion:

> One of the great things that came out of this was I hear there was a small group of people [who] got together from a church…. They got together and they had an interesting conversation with a pastor. From what I understand [it] really started challenging his own thinking around the whole thing because now there was a face to the story…and they came to a different, and I think a better place, because of that.

Thus the power of student organization and voice has had a tremendous impact at the CCHS, with the result being efforts to improve social and cultural conditions for SGM youth.

Purple shirt day. Students at the CCHS spearheaded purple shirt day, a day in honour of those who had taken their own lives as a result of homophobic and transphobic bullying. Both focus group participants who work at the CCHS reported being stunned by the massive support and participation in the event by the student body. MT suggested that it deeply challenged students' thinking, especially those that chose not to participate. Students who assert collective voice through individual expression in this way send a strong message that homophobia bullying will not be tolerated. Importantly, the message did not come from administration; rather, it came from student peers. Purple shirt day can be constructed as a site of radical democracy, allowing students to produce meaning through acknowledging difference and compassion, therefore engendering a sense of voice and identity (Giroux, 1992).

Barriers to change.

Through the focus group process, several barriers to changing the culture of schools within the BRSD in order to make them safe and SGM-inclusive environments were identified. By highlighting the various sites of struggle that educators and SMG students face, we can envision possible strategies to further transgress and disrupt these spaces.

Barriers in Administration. Administration was identified as having encouraged the improvement of school culture for SGM students. However, participants feared that a change of administration would derail the important progress that had been made. Without policy mandating inclusive practices around SGM issues, school culture is at the mercy of an administration's agenda. While policy does not guarantee protection, Grace (2007) suggests "policy enables protection" (p. 35). Instituting policies concerned with SGM inclusivity in the school space as well as policies contesting homophobic and transphobic rhetoric would safeguard against a change in administration resulting in a change in the safety of SGM students.

Policy was also seen as key in addressing inconsistency around acceptable language use among schools and classes as well as in the hallways. Tim reported that pejorative language use was still permitted in some classrooms and that "some teachers are not addressing it at the level it needs to be." Sarah suggested it was the responsibility of school administrations to hold their staff up to certain expectations:

> Until somebody challenges you on it, it's not going to change practice…. If the administration is not going to move past those pieces and call their staff out on it and have documentation saying 'this is what you signed up for, this is the expectation in our building, this is what expected behaviour for teachers looks like,' change will never happen. If administrators hold that line teachers don't have much of an option but to comply. When it is made optional and there's no accountability to those pieces, I think we have what we currently have happening in schools.

The culture of the school community can be challenged if policy is enacted and educators are made accountable to uphold and apply it. Policy affects culture. MacGillivray (2004) posits that SGM inclusion in district policy permits the legitimation of queer, and policy prohibiting discriminatory behavior plays a key role in the long-term transformation of social norms.

Intersections of subjectivities. Giroux (1992) asserts, "Culture is a terrain of political and ideological struggle" (p. 230). The school culture is a site of continuous interaction and interplay of often clashing intersections of faith, location, sexuality, gender, class, race, and language. Alice reflected that students come full of opportunity "and they're not super duper judgemental," but that "a lot of that comes from their families and through media." Alice went on to discuss how religion is often at odds with inclusion of SGM people and, as such, their students may come with different understanding and beliefs around SGM issues than those desired by the school community. As an administrator, she indicated that being respectful of other influences while not compromising

on her own vision can be challenging. Tim illustrated the difficulty that some educators had reconciling their religion and the prospect of their school being home to a GSA:

> It was hard for other people who refused to let go of their belief systems….I had one conversation with a staff member who said he couldn't believe [the GSA] could exist in our school and that he couldn't, he could maybe not stay. And I said, 'That's your choice. That's your choice and there are schools that believe in what you actually do believe in.'

It is in these moments of unease, when value and belief systems are challenged by difference, a space is open to reconceptualise 'the Other' as familiar in the project of reconstructing difference (Giroux, 1997). Unease opens up a space for dialogue and learning, and exposes the subject to new ways of conceptualizing the world. The very act of being exposed to difference makes change possible.

Fear as a barrier to action. The participants reflected on the disconnection between the perception of negative consequences due to SGM inclusion in the school community and the reality on the ground when inclusive policy is implemented. There is a fear associated with possible fallout around policy implementation that can prevent individuals from affecting action. Yet in the experiences of participants, there has been little backlash from parents around SGM issues. Lynn stated, "We have a very strong Mennonite community in our area, but I have not had any parents speak to me about it in a negative way." Tim said he expected there would be considerable fallout from parents and

the community, but that his fears were unfounded. Those who have spoken against changes have been a small minority. There was a perception that parents would be barriers to change but in the case of the BRSD participants it was related that it has not been the case. Sarah suggested, “It is fear that holds people back from moving forward and I believe that there is huge fear out in other communities that surround Camrose.” This is an important finding that may resonate for educators in similar sized communities.

The experiences in the BRSD are hopeful. Despite possible backlash, educators forged on to make spaces more inclusive of SGM differences. Giroux (1997) contends that by acknowledging the relationship between power and culture within the educational space we can begin to contest dominant educational discourses. This enables us to transgress oppressive practices so we can bring about change to improve the social and cultural conditions for SGM individuals.

Access issues. In the early stages of organizing this research I stumbled upon a fairly significant barrier to access in the BRSD. The superintendent had requested I send him the advertisement for participants, which I did within the hour. When I did not hear back from him after a few days, I reached out to enquire about the status of my request. He had not received my message, and I received no bounce back or notice to this effect. My message had been effectively lost to the ether. After some investigation it was discovered that the division’s email server had filtered out my message because it contained the word ‘lesbian’. This was a considerable barrier; if I did not have a contact in the

board office who was persistent in getting to the bottom of the situation, then the superintendent may have never received my missive. I brought this story up in the focus groups and was interested to find that participants reported similar issues. Tim reported an instance where the BRSD Internet filter stood in the way of a student affecting change. He described how a female student was unable to access SGM information via the school computer or communicate electronically with staff about SGM issues.

MT also provided an example. While at school his son had tried to show his peers the website of a bed and breakfast he had stayed at in Italy. The B&B happened to be owned by a same-sex couple and, as there was likely queer inclusive language contained within the website, the site was blocked and made inaccessible on school computers. Sarah reflected on the message this system was sending to students:

> It also shows our lack of acceptance, it shows that we're not there. If we can't even have an email, if we can't open up a homepage, if we can't open up a hotel page at school, those are messages that are pretty loud and clear to students.

Tim reinforced her sentiments, "From our students' perspective, they're being excluded right off the top. Like they see a wall right there." Kumashiro (2002) theorizes that there is an essential relationship between knowledge and action; for action to take place, knowledge is required and that when knowledge is rendered inaccessible, it makes it more difficult for action to transpire. If a student is unable to find out more about QSAs or learn more about their

emerging sexuality via the Internet in the school space, it communicates a strong message of exclusion and being unacceptable. Filtering and censorship of this type is a form of queer silencing which suggests to users that their search is of a deviant nature (Schrader and Wells, 2007). Denying access also inhibits the formation of community both within and outside the school walls. Lacking access to knowledge does not make it impossible to affect change, but it certainly makes it more challenging.

Lacking professional development. There was little reported structured professional development available to educators and none that was mandatory. Because of this barrier it was left to individuals to educate themselves around SGM issues. As an illustration, Tim reflected on meeting with a gay student about the creation of the gay straight alliance. Unfortunately, he had applied the phrase "your people." The student was unsure how to proceed as Tim's unintentional use of language had created an us-them between him and the student. Having reflected on that experience, he concluded that professional development around SGM issues must be woven into the culture of the school as a requirement for educators. Tim emphasized:

> I don't think you can do the one shot deal….We need to revisit it and then go back to it again and then go back again so that the key message there is very clear. And I do believe there is a leadership component there and that I am a strong believer that it's at the administrator level because it will flow from there.

Grace (2009) applies what he terms the culture-knowledge-language-power nexus whereby there are important interplays among each connected element. Exclusionary culture is maintained through oppressive knowledge and language, but it has the power to be transformed through critically engaging new and inclusive language and introducing new forms of knowledge. By having administrators (power) insist on changing the culture through visiting and revising language and knowledge around SMG issues, one basis of transformation is enacted. Professional development for educators allows the culture-knowledge-language-power nexus to change the social and cultural conditions for SGM students, thus making the school environment safer and more welcoming.

Concluding Remarks

While I anticipated hearing nihilistic stories of SGM youth growing up in a backward area, I was surprised and somewhat joyous to hear that the conditions in the BRSD had improved markedly in recent years for SGM students. Positive changes resulting in improved social and cultural conditions for SGM youth have come from a variety of sources including top-down changes and grassroots initiatives. The positive changes that have come about may prove useful to other educators in rural spaces seeking to improve the conditions in their schools for SGM youth. As Sarah noted;

> If other schools knew that the Comp [High School] didn't have as much backlash as what they maybe thought or expected perhaps that

knowledge alone may act as a catalyst to have other schools move in that direction.

While this study has focused on the BRSD as a case study, many of the experiences and lessons learned may prove useful around implementing changes in policy and practice in other school districts and schools. The BRSD experience may resonate with others providing ideas and ways that they can work to transgress homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism in their practices.

In the project of developing agency and discovering voice, educators in the BRSD have, through radically asserting SGM issues into school culture, made considerable strides forward for SGM students (Butler, 2006). While there is work to be done, by continuing to challenge exclusionary language, create safe spaces, and provide forums for SGM students to be heard, the culture-knowledge-language-power nexus operating in schools can continue to shift, thereby further improving the social and cultural conditions for sexual and gender minority students (Grace, 2009).

Chapter 6: Concluding Perspectives

Considerable research has and is being done with SGM students in schools (see Chapter 2); however, the context of location in particular qualitative research projects has limited generalizability. For example, the social and cultural conditions for a rural queer youth in a school in Arkansas are likely different from conditions experienced by a youth in southern British Columbia. This is the case for a number of reasons including, but not limited to, federal, state or provincial law, school codes, curriculum, the nature of inclusive policymaking, community organizations, religious affiliation, community history, community role models, presence of QSAs (Queer Straight Alliances), school board polices/politics, school system (public/separate/Francophone), and so forth. There may also be considerable differences among and across communities that are geographically close. Thus the conditions in schools for a SGM youth in the Battle River School Reg. Div. No. 31 (BRSD) are likely different from those a queer youth might experience in Buffalo Trail Reg. Div. No. 28 (which boarders BRSD). Moreover, the conditions among schools in a district or, as focus group participants reported, among classes in a school, can be staggeringly different.

This research project focused on the context of six educators in a number of schools in one school division. The data is not intended or expected to be generalizable. The purpose of this research was to give voice to rural SGM issues and to a group educators desiring change in their communities for SGM

students. To date, neither has received substantial academic attention (see Chapter 2). Participants provided stories of improvement, challenges, and change in the lives of their SGM students in their rural space. Hopefully, what we can learn from these narratives and their experiences can help.

Current research is useful in projecting a vision for improving the lives of SGM youth. By coming to understand where we are, we are better equipped to understand where we need to go. Research coupled with queer theory—a framework concerned with the promotion of social justice and transgressing homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism—allows us to conceptualize ways in which SGM students might develop agency in rural spaces.

As a SGM person who attended school in a rural area, the research works toward a transformative perspective and therefore the research is decidedly political. Morris (1998) indicates that "identities are necessarily political" (p. 279). In politicizing the issues of SGM people in rural space, the goal is to make changes that can improve the lives of SGM youth now, making the social and cultural conditions more accommodating and safer.

Using a focus group case study approach provided detailed narrative insights into the experiences of individuals working to transgress homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism in the Battle River School Division (BRSD). The research utilized a queer theoretical approach and focus groups were useful in illuminating successes and struggles. The focus groups also encouraged participants to envisage spaces for further developing agency in the project of

revising the school culture to be inclusive of sexual and gender minority (SGM) students.

As the focus group process was vital not only to the research results, but also as a method itself, it is worthwhile to reflect on the utility of that experience both for the participants and the researcher.

The Focus Group Process

The focus group process allowed new knowledge to be developed and common experiences to be shared by a community of self-selected participants desiring change and improvement in the culture of their schools for SGM students. Kitzinger (1995) posits, "Focus groups are not an easy option. The data they generate can be as cumbersome as they are complex." (p. 302). While the data was sprawling and diverse, I have attempted to synthesize it in such a fashion that is both faithful to participants' experiences and useful for educators looking to improve their school cultures for SGM students. As Moss (2007) suggests, focus groups are a useful mechanism in "addressing limitations of analysis, collective experience, and silence" (p. 378). Focus group participants came to new understandings of the culture and space both within their schools and across the district for SGM. In reflecting on the focus group experience, MT summarized:

> I think that, by practicing and talking and being uncomfortable sometimes, and being okay being uncomfortable, [and] being alright with maybe feeling like you lost control a little bit–but that's all right–that's

> where some cool stuff happens sometimes. And this has been a good experience, too. Appreciate the opportunity.

The focus groups process permitted me to learn from the participants and their experiences. Conversely, the participants were able to acquire new knowledge from each other. Morgan (1993) concludes:

> A successful focus group project can help to forge a human connection between those who commission a project and those who serve as the subjects of their investigations. And, whether this helps to reduce tensions in troubled settings or simply makes people feel good about their experiences in the research process, it is a valuable end in itself" (p. 18).

In this way the focus group process itself served as a non-formal critical adult education space focused on social justice and ethical practice. It is hoped that participants will use their experience and knowledge acquired through the focus group process to make further improvements for SGM individuals in the spaces they occupy.

Findings

The focus group process illuminated how conditions for SGM students in the BRSD have changed and continue to change. Participants spoke to both top-down and student driven grassroots initiatives that have had a positive effect for SGM students in their schools and division. They also identified various barriers—including institutional, philological, and assumed ones (e.g. parents,

community members)—that have delayed or obstructed the creation of safe and caring school environments for SGM students.

Top down changes—those instituted by educators within the district—included challenging language use both in the classroom and hallways; having staff that were out in the school setting; having leadership from various community leaders, including SGM people and issues into classroom practice; identifying the school administration's role in changing school culture; and creating safe-spaces in schools for SGM students. It was heartening to hear that many educators in the division have taken positive steps to make their schools and classroom spaces safer and more welcoming for SMG students. Through our conversations it became clear that educators have had a key role in moulding their classroom spaces by modelling appropriate language and behaviour and that by doing so, positive changes has been brought about for their SGM students. While the participants were engaged with and committed to SGM inclusion and improving the social and cultural conditions of their students, they also identified there were shortcomings between division schools and individual classrooms. Still it is hoped that progress continues to be made and that additional top-down actions can be locally enacted.

The top-down educator driven changes and improvements reported by participants are consistent with the suggested steps to be taken by educators in order to improve school cultures for SGM students, as reported in the literature (see Chapter 2). The participants' narratives add depth by providing concrete

examples of how change has been affected in their rural division in the project of engendering agency and identity construction for SGM students.

Grassroots Changes—those that were student driven initiatives—included the creation of a Queer Straight Alliance (QSA) and establishing a purple shirt day against homo/transphobic bullying. These changes exemplify the ways in which SGM students in the district have resisted and challenged heteronormative social and cultural constructions, thereby asserting their place in school and community spaces. The participants spoke to the power of student voice and how impactful these changes were as they originated from students themselves. The grassroots changes positively affected the school culture of Camrose Composite High School (CCHS) and had a reported ripple effect throughout the district. Not only did these actions serve to raise awareness of SGM people, they also created an opportunity for dialogue between students and educators. The GSA increased the visibility of queer identified students and created a safe space for those coming to understand their identity and individuality. Finally, having a GSA in CCHS communicates an explicit institutional acceptance of SGM students, that SGM students are welcomed and will be supported both by allied students and supportive educators.

Participants identified barriers that obstructed or delayed the inclusion of SGM students in several areas including administration, technology access, and professional development. They also identified that fear was a considerable barrier to affecting change. What became clear was that there was a desire in participants to break down these barriers further. Participants felt that additional

pressure needed to be applied on administration to further protect the marginalized SGM student population. The barriers identified may provide useful insights for educators working in rural spaces seeking to improve their cultures for SGM students. Addressing invisible barriers such as Internet filtering is a simple example of how educators can create more welcoming environments for their SGM students. Participants' acknowledgement of various barriers suggests that they are reflecting critically on social and cultural conditions impacting SGM students; having been identified, they can now be addressed.

Recommendations for Action

The scope of the research conducted for this thesis is small. A sample of six participants allowed each individual's unique experiences to be shared both with other participants and through the write-up. Applying a queer theoretical framework to the research design and analysis provided insights into how homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity have been challenged, and it provided insight into how they may further be transgressed. While their stories and reflections are useful in coming to a better understanding of the current social and cultural conditions for SGM students in the BRSD, there is ample opportunity for additional research to be conducted in rural spaces.

The experiences of SGM youth in the rural space have received little academic attention. While the focus of this study was educators, coming to better

understand how rural queer students conceptualize their experiences in the community and schools would be helpful in building appropriate professional development models. Studies working specifically with queer rural youth would further the project of improving the conditions for SGM youth in those spaces. Finally, with the deliberate application of queer theoretical principles, the research process itself may be useful in building resiliency in rural SGM youth participants.

Another research possibility is to investigate the utility of creating a distributed community of practice connecting allied and queer educators looking to improve their school cultures for SGM students (Wagner, 1998). Virtually connecting pockets of educators, thereby creating a critical mass, may permit them to support each other and share their challenges and successes with colleagues rather than working in isolation.

Final Thoughts

In recent years there have been considerable legal, institutional, and social advances for sexual and gender minority people. However, what the GLSEN and Egale studies tell us is we are still not equal; there is still much work to be done. Perhaps Tim said it best, "We're further along than we were, but I wouldn't say for one moment that we've arrived."

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Appendix A: Research Participant Advertisement

Research Participation Opportunity

Are you a teacher concerned with the health and wellbeing of your sexual-minority students?

Is making the classroom an inclusive space for gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, trans-identified, two-spirit, queer and questioning students important to you?

Have you being teaching in the community for 2+ years?

If you answered yes to the above questions I would like to hear from you.

As the 2011 Report on the State of Public Health of Youth in Canada clearly indicates sexual-minority youth are much more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts.

In order to combat LGBTTQ suicide, the cultures of schools must change to become accepting for and inclusive of sexual minorities. In order for these changes to occur, a deep understanding of the social and cultural conditions that exist for sexual minorities is required.

The study, "Social and cultural conditions for sexual minority students in a rural community: a case study of teachers' perspectives," proposes to investigate the context, including enabling and inhibiting factors, of teachers working in rural schools to create an inclusive environment for sexual minorities. By contextualizing the social and cultural conditions of these rural spaces it is hoped that steps can be taken to improve conditions that exist for sexual minorities in the school.

Participants will commit to two focus groups (approximately 1 hour each) utilizing semi-structured discussion that will inform the research by speaking to past and present challenges in the school and the community.

If you are interested in participating please contact:

Wade Kelly
wade.kelly@ualberta.ca
Graduate Student Researcher (M.Ed)
Faculty of Education
University of Alberta
(780) 709-9233

Appendix B: Invitation and Letter of Consent for Research Participants

Invitation and Letter of Consent for Research Participants

Wade Kelly, B.Ed., M.Ed. student
Department of Educational Policy Studies
Faculty of Education, University of Alberta
Tel: (780) 709-9233, E-mail: wade.kelly@ualberta.ca

[Date]

Attention:

_____
[Research Participant's Name]

Re: Participation in a research project entitled ***Social and cultural conditions for sexual minority students in a rural community: a case study of teachers' perspectives.***

It is important that schools act swiftly to make changes in order to protect sexual-minorities (individuals who identity as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, two-spirited, queer, and questioning [LGBTTQ]). As the 2011 Report on the State of Public Health of Youth in Canada clearly indicates sexual-minority youth are much more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts. In order to combat LGBTTQ suicide, the cultures of schools must change to become accepting for and inclusive of sexual minorities. In order for these changes to occur, a deep understanding of the social and cultural conditions that exist for sexual minorities is required.

This study proposes to investigate the context, including enabling and inhibiting factors, of teachers working in rural schools to create an inclusive environment for sexual minorities. This research is approached from a transformatational change perspective and seeks to identify specific local challenges and recommend courses of action by contextualizing the social and cultural conditions of study participants. It is hoped that by coming to a more complete understanding of the culture of these rural spaces that steps can be taken to improve conditions that exist for sexual minorities in the school. Focus groups will inform the research by speaking to past and present challenges in the school and the community and participants will be encouraged to brainstorm courses of action through semi-structured discussion.

Parameters of Participation: Participants will engage in two focus-groups with up to 5 other participants. Each focus groups will take place for a duration of up to 1 hour in a private location. A hand-held, digital recording device will be used to record the interviews.

Participant Background: Participants must have been teaching in the community for a minimum two years and feel strongly about equality in the classroom for sexual minorities. It is critical that participants in the study be allies to the LGBTTQ population in order for the possibility of collective action to result from the study.

You are invited to sign this consent letter in the space provided below once you read the following guidelines for participation:

- You feel strongly about equality in the classroom for sexual minorities. You are a member of or consider yourself an ally to the LGBTTQ population.
- You have taught in the community for a minimum 2 years.
- You agree to maintain confidentiality of the focus group proceeding including details revealed by other members during the sessions.
- As a research participant, you are asked to sign this consent letter to participate.
- You will have the right to participate free from value judgment, risk of harm, or evaluation of your participation.
- There will be no disadvantages to not consenting or participating.
- You will have the right to refrain from answering any particular questions, and you will have the right to opt out of the research until member checks have been complete without penalty. Participants may contact my research supervisor, Dr. Andre Grace, or myself if they wish to opt out of the research study. This may be done verbally or in writing.
- Processes to provide accuracy of data, security, confidentiality, and anonymity are implemented in the design of the study. A recording device will be used to ensure accuracy of data collected from the interviews. Security and confidentiality measures will be implemented, including the back up of data, secure storage of digital audio recordings, and a plan for deleting electronic and hard copy data.
- Only the researcher, research supervisor and transcriber (whom is required to sign a confidentiality agreement) will have access to data and information. To ensure anonymity participants may choose a pseudonym or one will be assigned.
- You will be able to review research material as part of an iterative process. You will be provided with an focus group summary for correction, amendment, and editing. Your interpretations, resistances, and challenges will be taken into account in analysis, writing and editing processes.
- You will be provided with a copy of the research report culminating from this research study.
- You agree that I can use information in secondary writing beyond the research report, which includes such writing as conference papers, book chapters, or journal articles. The same ethical considerations and safeguards will apply to secondary uses of data.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Research Ethics Board 1 (REB 1) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the REB 1 Coordinator at (780) 492-2614.

Contact information for this research project:

Wade Kelly
Graduate Student Researcher
(780) 709-9233
wade.kelly@ualberta.ca

Dr. Andre Grace
Research Supervisor
(780) 492-0767
andre.grace@ualberta.ca

I consent to participate in this research project entitled ***Social and cultural conditions for sexual minority students in a rural community: a case study of teachers' perspectives.***

Participant's Print Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date:_____

I would like a copy of the final research report. Wade Kelly can provide me with this report via the following contact method:

Participant's contact details:

_____

Researcher's Print Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C: Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

Wade Kelly, B.Ed., M.Ed. student
Department of Educational Policy Studies
Faculty of Education, University of Alberta
Tel: (780) 709-9233, E-mail: wade.kelly@ualberta.ca

[Date]

Attention: _____
[Transcriber's Name]

Re: Participation in a research project entitled ***Social and cultural conditions for sexual minority students in a rural community: a case study of teachers' perspectives.***

Because of the sensitive nature of work around sexual-minorites in educational spaces, I understand and accept that I am required to maintain strict anonymity and confidentiality in regard to this study. Therefore I agree to treat all information and materials confidentially and to respect the right of all research participants to anonymity as two terms of my involvement in this study. I will not discuss or share the research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than Wade Kelly, the principal researcher and Dr. Andre Grace (research supervisor).

For this research project, I will be involved in transcribing focus group data. In my involvement with this study I will comply with processes to provide accuracy of data, security, confidentiality, and anonymity that have been implemented in the design of the study. These include the following processes:

- A recording device will be used to ensure accuracy of data collected from the interviews. Verbatim transcripts will be made from the digital recordings.
- To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms will be used.
- Security and confidentiality measures will be implemented, including the back up of data, secure storage of digital recordings, and a plan for deleting electronic and hard copy data.
- Only Wade Kelly, Dr. Andre Grace (research supervisor) and transcribers will have access to interview data and information.
- I will return all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts, digital files) to Wade Kelly when I have completed the research tasks.
- After consulting with Wade Kelly, I will erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the principal researcher (e.g., information stored on computer hard drive).

Confidentiality agreement to assist in a research project entitled ***Social and cultural conditions for sexual minority students in a rural community: a case study of teachers' perspectives.***

Transcriber's Print Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Print Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix D: Email to Participants Between Focus Groups

Email Sent to Participants in Preparation for the Second Focus Group

Sent:
Sunday February 5, 2012

Subject:
Focus Group 2 Sessions Details

Body:
Thank you again for volunteering your time on Thursday. It was a pleasure to meet you all and hear about the positive changes happening in the Battle River School Division for sexual-minority students. I have reviewed the recording from our last session and was able to pull out some themes which I would like to explore further on Tuesday.

In recent years positive changes have come about in your schools making the culture more open and accepting of sexual-minority students. The impetus for this change was attributed, at least in part, to sources within community, from community leaders like Berdie Fowler, to steadfast administration and the students themselves. What lessons can be learned from changes that have taken place in Camrose in recent years? How might be they be applied to other communities, schools, and/or districts? What changes have had the biggest impact on the social and cultural conditions for sexual minority students in your schools?

There are plenty of positive changes happening in the BRSD but from our first discussion it seems there is still work to be done. It was indicated that students tend to apply different language filters depending on the teacher. It was also indicated that slurs and bullying are very much present in the halls. This is consistent with the 2011 Egale Report, Every Class in Every School: Final Report on the First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools, which found that "70% of all participating students, LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ, reported hearing expressions such as "that's so gay" every day in school and almost half (48%) reported hearing remarks such as "faggot,""lezbo," and "dyke" every day in school." Additionally, "74% of trans students, 55% of sexual minority students, and 26% of non-LGBTQ students reported having been verbally harassed about their gender expression." What changes could be made to promote inclusivity for sexual-minority students in the district, schools and classrooms? Are teachers expected to monitor and consistently apply rules regarding language use? Should they be? Of the 700+ that attend Camrose Composite High only a handful belong to the QSA. Are students comfortable being out and open? Are schools welcoming places for sexual-minority students, or just bearable places?

Those are a few of the main themes I have identified from our first session; there are certainly more. I look forward to hearing your thoughts and reflections on Tuesday when we meet for our second and final session at 6:00pm. Thank you again to Nancy for providing us with the lovely space. I look forward to seeing you then!

Regards,
Wade