Essential Voices:
The Lived Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,
Transgender, and Queer Individuals in a Rural Midwestern School

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Dedication

For all the Jonah's, and Ben's, and especially for Jamie, Charlie, and Justice.

Abstract

Homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity are prevalent and damaging forces in the world. Employing a thematic topic analysis of available research on these structures, I argue that empirical research, especially in rural areas, has been neglected and is incomplete. Drawing from interview data with ten lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students, five teachers, and three administrators, this work seeks to contribute to the much-needed research surrounding homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity in one rural school. This dissertation also employs a composite narrative methodology (Willis, 2019), which details the lived experiences in narratives of Jamie, Charlie, and Justice. It also employs space, spatial justice, feminism, and antivillainification as theories for analysis.

Keywords: homophobia, transphobia, heteronormativity, rural, LGBTQ

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Personal, professional, and academic experiences have brought me to this work. Personally, I have witnessed friends, students, and colleagues experience the harmful and often deadly effects of homophobia and transphobia. Professionally, I have witnessed students, parents, and colleagues tacitly and outwardly uphold homophobia and transphobia through their denial of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) existence or importance, often resulting in curricular exclusion and lack of student support. Academically, I have encountered pivotal individuals and scholars who have researched and written about the harmful ways homophobia and transphobia are enacted and upheld, by influential persons, practices, and policies.

Not all of my experiences have been adverse, as scholarly work I have read also described how schools are working towards improving the experiences and lives of LGBTQ individuals. I have also witnessed resilience among many LGBTQ individuals who tirelessly worked to establish a Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) that, despite resistance towards its formation, often supports and provides spaces of safety and acceptance for LGBTQ individuals at the rural school within this study, which I have assigned the pseudonym Boyton.

I have also been a part of staff training surrounding LGBTQ issues. Based on staff surveys following our training, many participants suggested a need for more time to discuss ways in which to serve our LGBTQ population better. Additional training came to fruition in the fall of 2019, which I will discuss later in this work. Most importantly, my work has introduced me to individuals, both LGBTQ and straight, whose suggestions have provided the critical insight needed towards changes in the public-school space.

Their voices and lived experiences can potentially improve the lives of LGBTQ and straight individuals in Boyton and possibly beyond.

Personal Experiences

It began in my elementary years when Jack Tripper of the sitcom *Three's Company* announced he was gay. At the time, I had no idea what that meant. However, based on the laughter of the studio audience, I assumed it represented something both positive and happy. Later that year, several of my classmates relentlessly teased, my friend Ben. They called him gay, and again, the response to this word was laughter from everyone—except Ben. He did not laugh; he cried. Ben's sadness prompted me to find out what gay meant, and I was saddened, but not surprised, by its harmful intent. After our high school graduation, I learned that Ben had committed suicide, possibly due to his lifelong harassment.

I was teaching social studies in a rural school many years later. I learned one of my students was routinely harassed, taunted, and threatened by his peers because of his gender expression and perceived sexual orientation. At first, Jonah denied his peers accusations, but after several years decided to come out to his close friends and family members. As a result, Jonah faced additional harassment from many people, including his parents. Instead of supporting him, Jonah's mom and dad pledged to counsel him straight. Jonah endured daily hatred and harassment throughout high school, but homophobia eventually killed his spirit, and he fled his rural home leaving behind his family and friends.

Jonah rarely returns to Boyton, but he is still a part of my life due to Facebook and other social media. He recently reached out to my daughter in apology for his six

years of absence, which he said was the result of him being in a very dark place due to isolation from family and friends. Jonah and others who share similar experiences are the inspiration for this work.

Professional Experiences

My experiences as a teacher in Boyton's rural midwestern high school have also brought me to this work. In 2003, Boyton established a GSA that meets one day per week after school. The average number of participants is ten, but numbers can fluctuate depending on members' outside commitments. Most participants are high school students, but sometimes middle school students choose to attend. These younger individuals do not have the support of a middle school GSA; therefore, their older peers have invited them to attend their meetings. Additional high school teachers and administrators are sometimes present, but typically the only adults in attendance are the GSA advisor (who is also a teacher) and me.

Members spend our GSA meeting time discussing student-led topics centered on family, homework, significant others, and friends, but sometimes the group chooses to play games or watch a movie. The activities at meetings do not seem to matter because the larger goal of providing a space where members feel comfortable and safe is being met. In a pilot study I conducted at Boyton in 2019, my participants, who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ), said the GSA meeting was the best part of their week. Participants suggested it was an accepting place where they could be their authentic selves. Even when they could not attend the meeting, students suggested they feel better merely knowing the GSA exists. Mayo (2013) suggested,

The presence of a GSA does not solve the problems faced by LGBTQ-identified

youth and their allies, but it is one part of a larger solution because it positively

affects the school experiences of many youth regardless of whether they actually

attend meetings. (p. 357)

Research conducted in numerous school settings has indicated similar findings.

More specifically, established GSAs have proven beneficial to the entire school space, as

they "generate awareness about homophobia 'because there are some people in [school]

that have no idea what that means…'" (Lapointe, 2015, p. 152). GSAs are seemingly

ways in which LGBTQ individuals and their allies reorganize both curricular and

extracurricular space in ways that "resist and/or alter the imposed meaning of

[heteronormative] space" (Schmidt, 2015, p. 256). Essentially, established GSAs

contribute to a safer school climate for all students. Alongside scholarly research, being a

member of the GSA has provided me with a reassurance of its importance, which has

prompted me to ask myself how this group might serve an even greater student

population? One way this might happen is through increased membership (both students

and staff).

Students who are members of the GSA sometimes discuss how they might attract

higher membership. A typical way of recruiting members in this setting is by bulletin

board advertisements, indicating meeting times and locations. Hanging meeting signs,

however, has proven to be a significant challenge at Boyton. In 2016, the GSA could only

hang its signs one day per week (dissimilar to other clubs), which prompted them to

petition the administration for equal access. GSA members' petitions were successful,

and signs now hang full time alongside all others, and a new administration attempts to hold students accountable for tearing them down.

The GSA still faces significant challenges from their peers and the greater community, but it continues to provide many students at Boyton with a space for which they will fight. During the pandemic of 2020, students often communicated with me via email and were dedicated to holding GSA meetings virtually, which (since in my experiences students do not like virtual meetings) was an indicator of its importance.

Academic Experiences

Educational experiences over the past several years have also brought me to this work. In 2017, I first read Crocco's (2002) piece entitled "Homophobic Hallways: Is Anyone Listening," in which she argued that LGBTQ histories are absent, yet belong, in the curriculum. She argued that gender and sexuality issues are already being "taught" in schools. However, instead of happening in the classroom or the explicit curriculum, students encounter them in the hidden curriculum of the hallways and locker rooms. Learning that takes place in these spaces is counterproductive, as it often fosters rumors and stereotypes, as well as homophobic and transphobic enactments.

Crocco (2002) reinforced my previous beliefs and efforts towards LGBTQ inclusion in my own classroom, and further inspired my desire to advocate for greater LGBTQ curricular inclusion. As such, I conducted research for a literature review that included additional empirical pieces from the 2002 special issue of *Theory &Research in Social Education (TRSE),* which focused on LGBTQ curricular inclusion. Scholars in this issue supported the need for LGBTQ inclusion and suggested that the social studies were best suited to accomplish this task. Crocco argued,

dealing with issues of sexuality in the social studies should be a moral imperative

for the field, with attention paid by social studies educators to the myriad

dimensions of the subject within the context of school and teacher education

curriculum. (p. 219)

Scholars in the 2002 issue of *TRSE* also contributed to my experiences

by suggesting that LGBTQ inclusive curriculum might foster an increased sense of

human rights awareness and tolerance among students (e.g., Crocco, 2002; Oesterreich,

2002; Thornton, 2002). Specifically, Oesterreich (2002) argued that human rights "are

about having the opportunity to live as one would choose to live, without gross

interference or violation, and having reasonable means to do so" (p. 288). Essentially,

when the explicit curriculum includes gender and sexuality, homophobic actions and

misunderstandings decrease, often leaving room for the extension of human rights

(including living life as one chooses) to all individuals.

In addition to increased respect for human rights, Thornton (2002) argued that

LGBTQ inclusive curriculum might also foster tolerance and understanding among

students in school, and by extension, the larger society. He clarified that curricular

changes do not require new courses, but instead "new subject matter within established

courses such as United States history" (p. 181). Overall, Thornton argued that inclusion

of gender and sexuality in social studies content "[could] be all accomplished within the

confines of courses that already exist" (p. 184), which would help to "develop

understanding and tolerance" (p. 184). LGBTQ inclusive curriculum was a prominent

component proposed in *TRSE* (2002); however, one crucial scholar challenged curricular

inclusion several years later.

Specifically, Schmidt (2010) suggested that curricular inclusion is only one component of a larger goal. She indicated that LGBTQ inclusive curriculum in the social studies content might foster increased human rights, acceptance, and tolerance. However, if this content does not challenge and dismantle heteronormative structures, curricular inclusion's positive effects are often overshadowed by this societal structure that often dictates human behavior. Schmidt's work further challenged my thinking, which led to my investigation/research surrounding homophobia and heteronormativity in rural spaces.

I was also enrolled in a gender studies course when I began my investigation of homophobia in rural spaces. This course critically examined heteronormativity and further reinforced Schmidt's (2010) argument that many spaces, including our schools, maintain this detrimental structure. When I returned to my classroom (in Boyton), heteronormative policies and practices became evident, and I understood that I had been a contributor to these detrimental structures. Schmidt's argument became apparent as I realized that simple curricular inclusion is inadequate unless paired with a dismantling of heteronormativity.

When beginning this research, I also attended presentations surrounding LGBTQ issues led by my advisor Dr. J.B. Mayo. His knowledge, passion, and excitement in these sessions seemed to inspire everyone in the attendance. I cannot speak for other participants, but I left these sessions drawn to this critical work. Dr. Mayo's research is included in several locations in this dissertation, as it is foundational for work surrounding LGBTQ inclusion, resilience, and success in social studies education.

Summary

Personal, professional, and academic experiences with LGBTQ related prejudices that impact many individuals have brought me to this dissertation. It began when I wondered why my friend Ben was crying and resulted in the following question: What role does one rural school play in the lived experiences of its LGBTQ students?

Rationale and Research Questions

This section intends to provide the rationale for this dissertation. It is divided into the following five sections: (a) a brief description of homophobia and transphobia, (b) heteronormativity, school policies, and practices, (c) the lack of (and the need for) rural research, (d) researcher positionality and insider status, and (e) research questions. Each section describes why this research is warranted and suggests why I am uniquely situated to conduct this work.

Homophobia and Transphobia

Homophobia and transphobia foster negative attitudes, myths, and irrational fears towards individuals who identify LGBTQ (e.g., Snively, Kreuger, Stretch, Watt & Chadha, 2004; Nagoshi, Adams, Terrell, Hill, Brzuzy, Nagoshi, 2008). They are present in every level of society, but more specifically among adolescents in our schools (Yarbrough, 2004). Enactments of homophobia and transphobia in these spaces prove especially detrimental as youth spend most of their time in school, yet often lack the self-confidence to stand up to these harmful practices (e.g., Nagoshi et al., 2008; Yarbrough, 2004).

Although they share similar characteristics and damaging effects, homophobia and transphobia differ in several ways. While homophobia is an irrational fear of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals, transphobia is "emotional disgust toward

individuals who do not conform to societal gender expectations" (Nagoshi et al., 2008).

Discrimination and harassment due to transphobia do not just happen to transgender

individuals; it happens to "crossdressers, feminine men, and masculine women" (p. 521).

Essentially, transphobia is the result of a more significant issue surrounding the socially

constructed norms of gender roles and identity and not merely sexual orientation.

Homophobia and transphobia will be differentiated further in chapter two, but what they

share, the damaging impact they have on our youth, is the primary focus of this work.

Heteronormativity

School spaces often pressure young people to conform to societal expectations

and established norms implicitly and explicitly. Some of these expectations may prove

beneficial, as they serve to prepare students for their role in a democratic society. Avery

(2002) suggested, one expectation schools might have of their students is higher

tolerance. She argued that schools have the ability (and responsibility) to address

intolerance and then expect students to leave school understanding "that certain rights are

inalienable, and that affirming those rights to the minority strengthens the democracy" (p.

195). Essentially, schools have one of the first opportunities in the public experience of a

child's life to set expectations that encourage "kindness and tolerance and the disposition

and skills to dialogue across difference" (Parker, 2003, p. xviii).

In contrast, many practices, and structures, purposeful and hidden, are not

beneficial, as they serve to exclude specific individuals. One such power structure present

in society and schools is heteronormativity, or societal hierarchical enforcement of binary

gender and sexuality that serves to enforce what is "normal" in the everyday lives of

adolescents (Nagoshi et al., 2008). Heteronormativity, both outwardly and implicitly,

dictates how schools operate and is responsible for determining who is an accepted member of the school space. Engebretson (2016) argued that the "gender binary is alive and well within the school structure. Separating students based on gender for bathroom breaks, lining up, gym class, in-class competitions, and even the self-separation of choosing friends persist to reinforce the dominant gender binary" (p. 39). Therefore, schools must recognize the influence and far-reaching consequences of their implicit and hidden policies and practices and work to interrupt those that divide or exclude school community members. In these efforts, schools can move towards, instead of away from, inclusive democratic leanings.

Heteronormativity and School

Because heteronormative structures are often present in school policies and practices, they often dominate the day-to-day interactions of teachers and students. Notable ways that heteronormativity is maintained include dress codes, gender restrictive bathrooms and locker rooms, and anti-harassment policies that do not specifically name gender and sexuality (Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012.) Heteronormative practices specifically at Boyton also present themselves in more subtle ways that include: the continued traditions of homecoming king and queen, powder puff football games, dress codes specifically directed at boys or girls, and displaying pictures or artwork that normalize binary gender and heterosexual relationships. Heteronormative policies and practices are detrimental, as they serve to perpetuate othering and victimization of LGBTQ individuals both in and beyond the school space. Schools also have the power to challenge heteronormative power structures. More specifically, when LGBTQ inclusive

curriculum and specific LGBTQ harassment policies were in place, students frequently reported their school as safe (Toomey et al., 2012).

The connection between curricular inclusion, staff intervention, and school safety, however, is not universal. In their work with 2560 middle and high school students, Toomey et al. (2012) found a significant "disconnect between perceived school safety for gender nonconforming students and actual reports of harassment for the same reason" (p. 193). Essentially, higher reporting of LGBTQ harassment fostered the perception that school was unsafe, and lesser reporting fostered the perception of safety.

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) argued that students often lack support when they report harassment incidents. More specifically, "school officials may not recognize that anti-LGBT bullying is unacceptable behaviors or may not respond to the problem due to prejudice or community pressure" (GLSEN, 2016, p. 29). Therefore, it is essential to note that just because students are not reporting harassment does not mean it is not occurring.

Results of a national school climate survey indicated reasons behind non-reporting, as 55.3% of participants said they chose not to report incidences of harassment and assault due to a lack of, or non-enforcement of, supportive school policies (GLSEN, 2017). Participants in this survey suggested that reporting would not result in intervention but would make the situation worse. In some instances, participants reported that staff members responded to harassment reports by suggesting that victims "change their behavior" or not "act so gay" (GLSEN, 2017, p. 26). In all, "explicit attention to issues of gender nonconformity is needed in all schools to address the victimization that students often encounter when they break gender norms" (Toomey et al., 2012, p. 193).

Heteronormativity and Intersectionality

Heteronormativity, when considered alone, underestimates the many factors that manipulate and change the degree that LGBTQ individuals experience this powerful structure. Therefore, it is essential that research considers the intersecting elements of gender, sexual orientation, class, race, ability, and socioeconomic status. Brady (2016) adds to this argument by suggesting that researchers consider space in addition to the above-mentioned "hierarchy of systemic structures" (p. 110). She argued that those living in rural areas often experience heteronormativity and intersections differently from their urban peers. Therefore, we "cannot adequately accommodate a depth of differential engagement or process if place is left out of the logic" (p. 110).

Heteronormativity and socioeconomic status. Heteronormative policies and practices are not universal; therefore, intersecting factors of gender, sexuality, class, and socioeconomic status (SES) require considerable attention. Pini and Leach (2011) argue that socioeconomic status is uncommon in research surrounding heteronormativity. However, a theoretical understanding of class (especially in rural areas) is essential for a better understanding of a space's gendered organization. As suggested by Morris (2011) in his ethnographic work with low-income rural individuals, there are "intricate intersections between gender, class, and rurality" (p. 211). Being accepted in rural spaces is not only dependent on gender, as "class-based challenges create hidden anxieties for rural teenagers" (p. 221).

Relatedly, 500 lower-socioeconomic LGB participants, who were less educated and lived in rural areas, experienced more stress than those with higher-SES status. McGarrity (2014) argued that these individuals possessed "a smaller bank of resources—

tangible, interpersonal, intrapersonal—to deal with stressful life events compared with higher SES individuals" (p. 384). In all, when analyzing heteronormativity and its impact on the lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals, the intersections of gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status must be considered.

Socioeconomic status and its inclusion within rural studies was also a focal point in collected essays edited by Gray, Johnson, and Gilley (2016). Although their work seeks to highlight the importance of research that allows for "queer life beyond the city gates" (p. 19), they also stress the intersections of gender, sexuality, class, and socioeconomic status (SES) within rural work. One specific impact of lower SES they highlighted surrounded the notion that rural and lower SES LGBT individuals struggle to get their "particular issues raised and [their] voices heard within the wider LGBT movement" (p. 26).

For example, findings of a study conducted in rural Nova Scotia (where SES is below the national average and unemployment above the national average) indicated that LGBT members of this rural community were not allowed to raise the pride flag during Nova's Scotia's pride week celebrations. Baker (2016) described that even though same-sex marriages had been legal since 2004, their rural mayor refused to allow for the raising of the pride flag. Problems like these faced by this rural LGBT community are not exclusive to the rural space. Those living in the city have also faced this type of exclusion. The only difference is that these issues came to light earlier by those living in the city.

Heteronormativity and space. The school space often reinforces and maintains heteronormative practices. However, it is essential to consider that boundaries established

by power structures such as heteronormativity are permeable. Just because space is heteronormatively regulated, does not mean that members of each space are passive participants. They are instead agentic individuals that act and react in ways that push the boundaries of power in order to remake their space (Beebe, Davis, & Gleadle, 2012). Therefore, in addition to class, space also plays a significant role in maintaining and deconstructing heteronormativity. Beebe et al. (2012), argue that "social practice activates spatial meanings, they are not fixed in space but are invoked by actors, men, and women, who bring their own discursive knowledge and strategic intentions to the interpretation of spatial meanings" (p. 530).

Summary. School is one of the first experiences students have in the public space and is most likely where they first determine their role in a democratic society. If school experiences include kindness, inclusion, and compassion, students may develop the essential skills to participate in an inclusive democracy. If school experiences foster selfishness, exclusion, and othering, students may lack those essential skills (Parker, 2003). As heteronormativity significantly contributes to exclusion in the school space, it warrants further investigation. As such, this dissertation will consider how heteronormative structures impact one rural school.

Lack of Rural Research

High-quality research in rural communities and schools is lacking. Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, and Dean (2005) suggested four possible reasons for this deficiency. First, there are limited funding opportunities for research in rural areas. Second, there is a (mis)conception that the inherent qualities and traditions of rural schools are worthy of being preserved; therefore, unworthy of research that might challenge these traditions.

Third, existing rural work often lacks consistency as there have been "multiple definitions of 'rural' used in rural education research" (p. 2). Without specific parameters, rural research fundamentally lacks validity and replicability. Finally, due to the absence of rural work, there is a limited foundation for building additional studies leaving ample room for many understudied topics.

Scholars have also suggested that rural research often has an extremely narrow focus (e.g., Arnold et al., 2005). In their analysis of available rural studies, Arnold et al. (2005) found that from 1991-2003, repetitive research surrounding special education and instructional strategies left a significant gap in research for all other students. They also found that rural research surrounding larger student populations was often location-specific; thereby, removing the option to replicate or expand findings. One research topic suggested that might apply to the greater student body was labeled as the student "opportunity to learn" (p. 16).

When not extended to all students, however, the opportunity to learn becomes problematic. More specifically, research analysts found that "opportunity" often equates with the addition of higher-level learning and college preparation courses. Although these additions may be beneficial to some students, they do not provide opportunities for the larger student body. For example, the addition of college-level courses may not eliminate the victimization LGBTQ populations' experience, which "impedes [their] access to education" (Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013, p. 46). Therefore, it seems essential that "opportunity to learn" must consider more than content and instead consider individuals and how schools might improve everyone's educational spaces.

Lack of rural LGBTQ studies. (Mis)conceptions that LGBTQ individuals do not choose to live in rural spaces are among several reasons for what some scholars consider an "urban bias" towards LGBTQ research (Abelson, 2016, p. 1536). Most research conducted on homophobia and transphobia, and how it impacts LGBTQ youth, has denied rural spaces (e.g., Abelson, 2016; Bell & Valentine, 1995; Hastings & Hoover Thompson, 2011; Nagoshi et al., 2008; O'Connell, Atlas, Saunders & Philbrick, 2010).

Scholars such as O'Connell et al. (2010) have speculated that an urban bias towards research on homophobia may exist due to perceived notions that LGBTQ individuals avoid rural spaces because they are conservative and consequently unaccepting. Bell and Valentine (1995) also suggested that research has focused on urban areas because of incorrect assumptions that the "gay identity" is only realized and lived by "opportunities offered by city life—by anonymity and heterogeneity" (p. 113).

Like studies on homophobia, empirical work on transphobia is insufficient; and both urban and rural spaces know less about the school experiences from this harmful structure (Greytak et al., 2013). As transgender youth experience "school policies, practices, and spaces that enforce gender segregation, such as school bathrooms, locker rooms, security procedures, and dress codes" (Greytak et al., 2013, p. 46), it is essential to consider the unique experiences of these individuals. Even when research references LGBT experiences, "transgender individuals are often not distinguished in the LGBT literature from gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, thus not distinguishing between issues of gender identity, gender roles, and sexual orientation" (Nagoshi et al., 2008, p. 522). As such, this work seeks to contribute to scholarship by allowing for the voices and the lived experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, *and* transgender individuals.

Overall, LGBTQ individuals reside in rural spaces, warranting research in these areas. More specifically, a report by the Movement Advancement Project (MAP) suggested 19 million LGBTQ individuals are living in the United States, and 4 million have chosen to reside in rural America (Miller, 2019). To that end, scholars such as Hasting and Hoover-Thompson (2011) and Nagoshi et al. (2008) have advocated for increased research in rural areas. Extensive research might allow for more thoughtful comparisons and better understandings of homophobia and education research has the potential to produce better support systems for all LGBTQ youth.

Researcher Positionality

My position as a rural insider and teacher uniquely situates me to conduct this work, as I have lived and taught (27 years) in a rural space most of my life. Because of this, I have insider knowledge of policies, practices, and traditions that an outside researcher may not have. My experiences do not necessarily equate to those of my participants. However, I feel my identity as an insider may allow for what Seidman (2013) considered a co-constructed analysis of data.

My identity as a white, cisgender, heterosexual, female, however, may bring into question my (in)ability to conduct this work. Identifying as heterosexual further perpetuates a production of knowledge by someone who is (un)wittingly fastened to structural heteronormativity (Allen, 2010). Scholars suggest that employing a feminist frame may lessen my (in)abilities. Feminism "urges us to recognize 'a messier world, where writing, researching, objects and subjects of research refuse to remain neatly within the boundaries that separate them, both because the world is messier than

disciplinary separations allow and because feminist questions well-pursued, mess with disciplinary order" (Ferguson, 2017, p. 274).

Employing a feminist frame may require a rethinking of my heterosexual identity, as I feel more closely aligned with straight. Allen (2010) argued that a straight identity acknowledges "[my] recognition of normative heterosexual social and institutional order by which I benefit and that I simultaneously seek to change" (p. 150). As this work intends to investigate and disrupt socially constructed norms and heteronormativity, I identify as white, cisgender, straight, and female. Nonetheless, my unearned privilege as white and straight requires daily interrogation of my place in the world and how that impacts this work. As Strom (2019) argued, "Because we exist in a world that conditions us, with cues both subtle and in-your-face, to uphold White supremacist heteropatriarchy, we are constantly learning and unlearning, always restricting while creating alternatives" (p. 130).

Rural Qualifications

The following section describes how my positionality as a rural insider, student, teacher, and GSA advisor may uniquely position me to conduct this research.

Rural student. My identity as white, cisgender, straight, and female may differentiate my lived experiences from my participants, but there are experiences that we may also share. Like them, I lived and attended school in a rural space. I also grew up in a space where religion, class, and social status mattered. More specifically, many of my peers were members of a church and subsequently, a youth group, and not being a member of either set me apart. I also grew up in a working-class family. There were significant periods when neither of my parents worked, and we relied on family and

friends for necessities. Our financial status prevented my involvement in many extracurricular activities as their cost and transportation requirements were more than we could afford. My clothing was always clean but did not match the standards set by those who had name brand items (of which they frequently reminded me).

Because of the above factors, I spent many of my school years feeling insecure and outcast. I was bullied and victimized (not in the same way or for the same reasons as my participants), but I carry those feelings with me to this day. My identity as cisgender, straight, and female may limit my understanding of LGBTQ individuals' lived experiences. However, my connections with many of them as rural and working-class may prove beneficial and contribute to a co-construction of data analysis (Seidman, 2013).

Rural teacher. My status as a rural teacher/insider at Boyton also situates me to conduct this research. It provides me with a certain degree of contextual knowledge and day-to-day witnessing that an outsider may not possess. Seidman (2013) suggested that contextual insider familiarity is helpful for qualitative research because it allows for a better, possibly co-constructed, analysis of data. He argued that "without context, there is little possibility of exploring the meaning of an experience" (p. 20).

Additionally, my membership in the GSA might also allow for greater accessibility, as participants are often comfortable sharing stories with someone they are familiar with and consider an ally. Student comfort in sharing stories with me has been evident during GSA meetings. Participants have shared their thoughts on actions and behaviors that have been happening in their community, homes, schools, and classrooms.

Rural GSA Advisor. As a classroom teacher at Boyton, I spend each day interacting with students. I hear about their lives and witness their interactions with peers. Most of their actions are harmless and typical, but some actions are intentionally hurtful to members of the LGBTQ community. I am not sure if interactions I have witnessed and experienced are new, or that I am now more aware of them. Nonetheless, the homophobic and transphobic behaviors I have witnessed partially serve as the motivation for this work. I have witnessed and heard about interactions and behaviors that are harmful to the LGBTQ community, but they are also harmful to the school space in general. My intent in sharing the following stories is not to equate with hurtful experiences of my participants or all LGBTQ individuals. However, these experiences may provide insight into harmful practices at Boyton High School. They may also reinforce this work's importance, as I have witnessed the harassment my participants often encounter.

GSA meetings moved to my room in 2019, and since then, I have noticed an increase in student actions that seem to be attached to my status as an openly LGBTQ ally. For example, equality stickers I have placed on my bulletin boards have been defaced and pulled down. My Boyton "Everyone Welcome" sign has been stolen, and if the daily agenda included civil rights or LGBTQ history, someone (most likely a student) erased those words while I was out of the room. Much of what students do and say is *not* outwardly homophobic, but I feel my status as an openly LGBTQ ally makes me target. More specifically, instead of directly harassing their LGBTQ peers, they instead indirectly harass them in other ways similar to the above microaggressions. In my experiences, most teachers are less apt to report these microaggressions as they are often hard to prove, and students seem to know this.

Participants confirmed my assumptions surrounding these actions during their interviews. For example, during passing time when I was out in the hallway, someone sprayed "fart spray" in my room. The person who did this confessed, but later told the assistant principal that a classmate had dared him to spray the Pride flag hanging behind my desk. In another incident, I came to my classroom to find several students behind my desk (where the flag hangs), taking pictures with their phones. During my interview with Jamie, she showed me a picture of the flag posted on social media with the caption "Fricking disgusting."

In addition, questions my students ask and comments they make during class about the LGBTQ acronym and history are intended to make members of the LGBTQ community uncomfortable. For example, when a student asks what the "Q" in LGBTQ stands for, many members of the class snicker, which heightens my awareness that student questions are not sincere and instead microaggressions directed towards LGBTQ individuals the classroom. Part of me wondered if I was overreacting to events happening in my classroom; however, during my interview with Lou, a teacher and GSA advisor, she confirmed my assumptions.

Lou suggested, "It is a real thought. For real, because [the] behaviors [in my room] since we moved the GSA into your room…have died down. Even though I have the same signage, I defend the same things." Essentially, the intensified struggles I have encountered since the GSA moved into my classroom are more than perceptions.

Summary. Overall, the above incidents indicate I am uniquely situated to conduct this vital work. Besides my insider status, I am emotionally connected and care deeply for individuals in this work and this space. Collins (1989) labeled my

connectedness to these individuals, and this space as "connected knower" or a "first-hand observer" (p. 761). She further suggested that researcher/participant connectedness allows for a higher "capacity for empathy" (p. 761), which is essential if qualitative researchers want to dismantle the researcher's ideas as knower and move towards a co-construction of knowledge.

Rationale and Positionality Summary

This dissertation seeks to examine how heteronormative structures contribute to the enactments of homophobia and transphobia in one rural school. It also seeks to connect LGBTQ individuals to their own story by providing space for their firsthand analysis, critique, and suggestions. It will not serve as a comparison of rural and urban schools, but merely a space for individuals in one rural school to share their insights and suggestions. It may also contribute to future research that impacts spaces beyond Boyton.

Rhodes (1997) suggested that members of the historically dominant group (white, male, heterosexual) have often dominated knowledge production; therefore, when considering new knowledge, it is critical to include the perspectives of members of groups outside of the dominant. Not only might this allow for alternative perspectives, but it may also contribute to "new knowledge and interpretations of social reality" (p. 10). This work also employs a method of participant-observer that relies on insider insight and experience. As a rural insider and teacher, I hope to contribute to new understandings of everyday practices in this rural, and possibly a more significant rural (or non-rural), space. As such, I pose the following research questions.

Research Questions

1. How do LGBTQ youth and their allies at one rural school characterize their experiences with gender and sexual identity?

2. What is the role of this high school space within these characterizations?

3. What is the role of this rural community within these characterizations?

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Review of the Literature

Theoretical Frame

Introduction

Empirical research on LGBTQ individuals' lives has typically avoided rural

spaces (e.g., Abelson, 2016; Bell & Valentine, 1995; Hastings & Hoover Thompson,

2011; Nagoshi et al., 2008; O'Connell et al., 2010). As such, this work seeks to analyze

how LGBTQ youth and their allies characterize their rural experiences and the role their

school plays in these experiences. Theories employed in this work include space and

spatial justice, which are increasingly finding their way into educational research.

Schmidt (2015) suggested, "understanding inequity requires attention to space, for it is

the production and engagement with space that inequity becomes entrenched in our social

experiences" (p. 254).

Additionally, this work employs feminist theories, as they suggest that

reorganizing space requires the inclusion of typically silenced voices. Feminism also

suggests a joining of forces. Therefore, this work considers how LGBTQ individuals and

allies (both students and staff) might form communities that can change institutional

spaces in ways that empower and encompass everyone who enters. Overall, this work

seeks to include the lived experiences and stories of LGBTQ individuals in one rural

school.

Spatial Theory

When analyzing societal power structures and their impact on human behavior,

researchers often employ theories that consider physical space. Spatial analysis of human

societies allows for a recognition of "how transactions between individuals and between

organizations are affected by the space that separates them" (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 107). Baker (2016) also suggested that employing spatial theory can be useful for research that intends to analyze individual attitudes, actions, and reactions in ways that may confront society's power structures.

Spatial theory is also essential for research that considers individual identities. As some research suggests, LGBTQ individuals living in rural spaces are often more hesitant than their urban peers to self-identify because it is often considered unsupportive and unsafe (GLSEN, 2017). Gray, Johnson, and Gilley (2016) argue, "Today more than ever, space matters where the politics of gender and sexuality in the United States are concerned, not because it is so powerfully determinative, but because its effects are so wildly unpredictable" (p. 7).

In all, the identities, actions, reactions, and cultural practices of any given space are dependent on and invoked by the unique persons and societal structures that produce, reproduce, and reinforce them (Beebe et al., 2012). Essentially, space is not monolithic; it is highly complicated, and the way that humans act and react, as well as find help and resources, often "depends on where [and with whom] they stand" (Grey et al., 2016).

Intersections of space. Physical space alone is insufficient when analyzing human behavior, as it upholds a misleading dichotomy that often positions urban in opposition to rural. Under this framework, rural is often considered unsafe and exclusionary for members of the LGBTQ population, whereas urban is safe and accepting. Gray et al. (2016) argue that critical, hostile, and violent behaviors and resilient responses towards the LGB community must move beyond the rural/urban binary. Breaking this binary is challenging as "urban-centric literature on gay and lesbian

identities has also constructed 'the city' in highly positive terms" (Taylor, 2011, p. 180). Instead of upholding a rural versus urban binary, scholars might consider the various intersections that complicate this troubling conception.

Specific intersections to consider when analyzing space include class and socioeconomic status. Taylor (2011) argued, "Attention directed at urban spaces frequently perpetuates exclusion by focusing on the more visible and open and spatial expressions of sexual identity, rather than the diverse, or even 'hidden' places outside of *and* inside the city" (Taylor, 2011, p. 179). Unknown factors (and impacts) of socioeconomic status were present within work surrounding a lesbian support group where working-class women suggested they felt less acceptance and support compared to middle-class attendees (Taylor, 2011). Overall, socioeconomic status intersected with space proves essential when considering levels of acceptance and safety for LGBTQ individuals.

Enactments of masculinity and femininity can also prove to be dependent upon the intersections of space and class, as rural working-class students express and maintain masculinity and femininity differently than their rural upper-class peers. Morris (2011) argued, "where boys and men embody 'hegemonic' 'subordinated' and other forms of almost set traits" should instead be considered a "messy, locally specific means through which different, sometimes contradictory ideas of masculinity gain pre-eminence" (p. 223). Rural schools and the class systems present within them, serve to impact student expressions of masculinity and femininity, and therefore impact behavior.

Masculine and feminine enactments within a space can also be dependent on socioeconomic status. More specifically, in a study conducted with working-class

teenagers in Ohio, Morris (2001) suggested that students from working-class families shared a common conception that masculinity equated to manual labor jobs, and femininity equated with dependence and support. Working-class masculine and feminine roles also guided student behaviors in the school in this study. Working-class boys often reacted with "masculine 'protest' bravado, flouting school rules and conventions" (p. 222). Girls in this study often reacted to their status by seeking the comfort and upward mobility that their school might offer. Overall, when analyzing space, the intersecting factors of class and socioeconomic status must be considered.

Space and social studies. Social education scholars often investigate pedagogical and curricular practices that might successfully prepare students to become engaged participatory citizens. Many factors enter into pedagogical decision-making, but as Schmidt (2013) argued, the school's spatial construction should be part of the decision making. She further suggested that social studies pedagogical investigations must "conceptualize meaningful civics curriculum [by looking] beyond the intended curriculum to consider the civics lesson embedded in spatial interaction and engagement" (p. 535). Schmidt concluded that the success of the LGBTQ inclusive curriculum is dependent upon a consideration of the often heterocentric power structures that are present but can often vary, and must uniquely be considered, across school spaces.

Summary. Space is not monolithic. For instance, space here refers to the land occupied by Boyton high school as well as classrooms, offices, restrooms, and other gathering and teaching spaces within the building. This means that posters, seating arrangements, and signage can be relevant; moreover, policies that organize those practices impact this school's spatial organization and the broader institution of secondary

schooling. All of these factors contribute to Boyton's spatial composition, and any variation has the potential to alter its construction. Ayers (2005) argued,

> All social life is 'contingent,' implicated and unpredictable because all parts of life depend on one another. What we think of as public and private, economic, and political, religious and secular, and military and civilian are deeply connected. Social change can start anywhere and lead anywhere. As a result, the most profound kinds of self-understanding can change radically and abruptly. (p. 135)

Based on this idea, Soja (2010) suggested that unjust spaces have the potential to be restructured in ways that uphold social justice principles for all of its inhabitants.

Spatial Justice

Dominant power structures are often created and upheld by the social construction of space. In order to better understand policies and practices that might dismantle spatial power structures and injustice, Soja (2010) suggested a pairing of space and social justice or spatial justice. He argued, "space is actively involved in generating and sustaining inequality, injustice, economic exploitation, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression" (p. 4). To better understand policies and practices that might dismantle spatial power structures and injustice, this dissertation employs a pairing of space and social justice or spatial justice.

Soja (2010) concluded that spatial justice is not a replacement for more traditional forms of analysis (such as social and historical perspectives). He instead suggested that space and spatial justice be paired with these methods when analyzing human societies and the (in)justice that happens within them. By pairing space with social justice, research might further engage in what Soja (2010) named a "social-spatial dialect" (p. 4),

which may "stimulate new ways of thinking about and acting to change the unjust geographies in which we live" (p. 5). For instance, Boyton might rethink some of the practices and policies such as homecoming court, gender specific dress codes, non-inclusive curriculum, and the addition of gender-neutral bathrooms to reorganize this space justly.

Spatial justice frameworks may also prove beneficial when considering contemporary society and its impact on the human condition. More specifically, considering spatial justice may prove beneficial when "seeking ways to reduce poverty, sexual discrimination, and environmental degradation" (Soja, 2010, pp. 14-15). It may also prove beneficial when considering "human rights, social inclusion-exclusion, citizenship, democracy, poverty, racism, economic growth, and environmental policy" (p. 15). Overall, (in)justice is better analyzed by pairing space and spatial justice with history and society.

Most importantly, when considering space, place, or location, such as a midwestern rural high school and community, it is critical to remember that humans are "just as much spatial as temporal beings...[and space is]essentially or ontologically coequal, equivalent in explanatory power and behavioral significance" (Soja, 2010, p. 16). Humans create space in ways that uphold and reinforce or work against and dismantle power. As this work seeks to analyze how a rural school's spatial construction impacts the lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals, spatial justice may prove essential in the analysis of data.

Spatial justice and feminism. As Soja (2010) suggested, pairing spatial theory with spatial justice further challenges and dismantles spatial/societal power structures.

One notable critique of researchers who make use of these theories is their lack of attention to feminism. Massey (2001) suggested, thus far, spatial justice has not moved far enough past the voices of the "white, male, heterosexual, western" (p. 225). Without feminism, any "independent consciousness expressed by an oppressed group [is considered] not of the group's own making and/or inferior to the perspective of the dominant group" (Collins, 1989, p. 747). To challenge the dominant narrative, knowledge, and the production of knowledge, research must create spaces that insist on the inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives. Schmidt (2015) argued, "It is not enough to 'see' the person in the margins but to bring his/her voice into the dialogue about what is taking place in an event, in a story, and in the shaping of theory" (p. 270).

Due to their lack of attention to feminist theories, cultural geographers such as Soja (2010) have been accused of upholding an existing body of knowledge that is foundationally Eurocentric and masculinist (Collins, 1989). Pairing feminism with spatial justice may remove historical absolutes, dismantle the heteronormative patriarchal order, and instead rely on methods that work "with/for/despite those cast as Others" (Fine, 1994, p. 140). Therefore, in addition to space and spatial justice, this dissertation employs a feminist framework.

Feminism

As a political ideology, feminism asserts the equality of the sexes at all levels of society and mandates that women have equal professional and educational opportunities. Since its origination, feminism has grown and changed in ways that have expanded its focus. In the 1980s, postcolonial feminists proposed that economically advantaged white women had universalized their experiences and did not consider the lived experiences of

women outside of their particular group (Gurney, 2015). Many who engaged in feminist work at this time demanded the inclusion of non-Western voices. They called for unification or sisterhood that for "Black and white, old and young, lesbian and heterosexual women alike, this [could] mean new paths to [survival]" (Lorde, 2007, p. 123).

Postcolonial feminists also insisted on moving away from either/or thinking and instead pursued a both/and framework, where the intersections of "gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, language, disability, age…etc." (Ferguson, 2017, p. 272), might "recognize dynamic and changing relationships rather than static entities (p. 271). Relevant to this work is the feminist goal of breaking the binary of gender by moving away from comparisons of women to men and towards "more subtle distinctions among fractured subject positions" (p. 270). Feminist thinking may not involve the disappearance of masculine and feminine qualities in people. However, there would be the disappearance of "describing people who fall outside those sets as somehow "'failing' at gender" (Gurney, 2015, p. 92).

Relatedly, feminism might recognize and address the presence of homophobia in society and how this structure seeks (often effectively) to maintain traditional gender roles. More specifically, homophobia and its often-accepted definition of "the fear of homosexuals or of homosexual contact" (Murphy, 2006, p. 210) tends to "pathologize both homosexuals and homophobia" (p. 210), thus reinforcing binary gender roles and upholding and reinforcing gender-based oppression. Therefore, feminism seeks to break that binary structure by redefining homophobia in ways that may result in greater gender equality.

Overall, despite differences within feminist thinkers, most feminist theory is "rooted in and responsible to movements for equality, freedom, and justice" (Ferguson, 2017, p 269). Feminist theory is not only about women. It is about refuting dualisms, embracing process thinking, and a "commitment to changing as well as studying the world" (p. 270). It does so by pushing boundaries, and recognizing the world is messy and, therefore, feminist work and "feminist questions, well-pursued, mess with disciplinary order" (p. 274).

I hope that employing a feminist frame within this dissertation will allow for new ways of thinking and organizing a rural school based on the lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals and their allies in ways that mess with its disciplinary order. Asher (2003) suggested ways in which feminist theories are essential when reorganizing the school space. She argued that we must,

> rethink curriculum and teaching practices so that they are representative of the diversity and difference we encounter in present-day contexts of school and society. In particular, I posit that educational discourses and practices need to engage differences that students and colleagues bring to the classroom; attend to their particular stories; recognize that identities and cultures are "fluid" and "hybrid" rather than static/fixed; recognize that this is true not only of "others" but also of the "self"; and engage in a self-reflexive process that allows the multiple, evolving identities, cultures, and representations to emerge as a critical aspect of the educational process. (p. 48)

Feminism in a rural school. To better analyze what role a rural school space plays in LGBTQ individuals' lives, this work employs postcolonial feminist theory. More

specifically, it will employ feminism that considers how power structures such as heteronormativity are maintained not only by the male/female binary, but also at the intersections of class, gender, and sexuality. This dissertation also recognizes that feminist theories require the voices of those most impacted to "make common cause with those others identified as outside the structure, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish (Lorde, 2003, p. 26).

In order to further break down societal power structures, feminism also suggests a joining of forces. Therefore, this work considers how LGBTQ individuals and allies (both students and staff) may form communities that might change institutional spaces in ways that empower and encompass everyone who enters. Lorde (2003) argued that "Without community, there is no liberation, only the most valuable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression" (p. 26). Employing feminism might allow for recognizing communities (of both help and oppression) in ways that impact the unique lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals in ways that define and empower (Lorde, 2003).

Summary. Feminist theories insist that the voices of those typically silenced are heard. As such, this work will include LGBTQ individuals who experience and resist homophobic enactments in their school. Their stories are not intended to further separate LGBTQ individuals from their peers but instead unite them. Their stories may detail ways in which they feel divided and excluded from their school, but within those stories, there may be suggestions for community. Collins (1989) argued that "Afrocentric feminist epistemology may lie in its enrichment of our understanding of how subordinate groups create knowledge that enables them to resist oppression" (p. 757).

Heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia are present in schools, and in order to dismantle them, we must first acknowledge their existence and deconstruct them as a community. As hooks (2014) suggested, "To counter this complicity, we must have more written work, and oral testimony documenting ways barriers are broken down, coalitions formed, and solidarity shared. It is this evidence that will renew our hope and provide strategies and direction for future feminist movement" (p. 110).

Literature Review

Terminology

My use of gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, queer, intersex, 2-spirit, and questioning, LGBT, LGBTQ, GLBTQ, LGPQ, and GLBTQI, TQQ, and LGTBT2S requires some explanation. Over time, and within different contexts, these terms have varied. While it would be convenient to use the same terminology throughout this work, each author I referenced chose their words carefully, purposefully, within specific contexts, to maintain their participants' self-identities. Therefore, I honored and maintained the terminology used by individual scholars/researchers referenced.

Introduction

This literature review contains available empirical studies, books, and papers published between 1986-2020 that focused on homophobia and transphobia. Themes include enactments of, and resistance to, homophobia and transphobia. All studies took place in the United States, except for six conducted in Iceland, Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and Belgium. Participants in these empirical studies ranged in age from 14-21; however, participants who left their rural home and moved to a larger city ranged from ages 14-49. I intentionally included a separate section centered on research on

transphobia, because I felt it essential to differentiate the specific reasons this harmful practice is perceived, upheld, and enacted. Homophobia and transphobia are similar, as they negatively impact LGBTQ individuals and society, but their differences justify my separation.

As such, this section will discuss the following themes: (a) descriptions and detriments of homophobia and transphobia (b) descriptions and distinctions of transphobia, (c) homophobia and transphobia among the LGBTQ population, (d) the impact of homophobia and transphobia on the entire school space, and (e) resistance and resilience of LGBTQ individuals and their allies.

Homophobia and Transphobia

Homophobia is "supported through cultural norms and manifested through anxiety, fear, disgust, anger, discomfort, aversion, and/or hostile and violent behaviors" (Snively et al., 2004, p. 63) toward members of the LGBQ community. Transphobia is emotional disgust and negative attitudes toward individuals whose gender does not align with their gender expression or gender assigned at birth (e.g., Makwana, Dhont, De keersmaecker, Akhlaghi-Ghaffarokh, Masure, & Roets, 2018; Nagoshi et al., 2008). Harassment towards these individuals is not always initiated by the unknown passerby or homophobic/transphobic stranger but instead is often by familiar people that LGBTQ youth encounter daily. Perpetrators often include peers, teachers, and parents who participate in acts of discrimination and harassment towards LGBTQ persons in many areas.

Although a significant portion of this literature review indicates a highly adverse reality for LGBTQ individuals, there are also many spaces of resilience and strength. I

dispersed resilience examples throughout this review, but there will also be a section

dedicated solely to LGBTQ resilience. The following section describes the bullying,

teasing, harassment, and other hate crimes as well as resilience reported by LGBTQ

individuals in their homes and schools.

Harassment at home. Society often regards home as a safe space. For LGBTQ

youth, however, this is not necessarily accurate. Many homes are considered conservative

and unaccepting of LGBTQ persons. Using an ethnographic method called composite

narrative, O'Conor (1993) collected interview data from 40 Black, white, and Latino

LGBT youth. Then compiled them into one story told by her fictitious characters named

Tommy and Christi. Overall, her work suggested that many teenagers who came out to

their parents faced extreme hostility, violence, and sudden homelessness. Participants

described their rural home as akin to "being Jewish in a Nazi home because family

members called them 'sick fag' 'queer,' and 'faggot'" (p. 10). Current research

surrounding the negative experiences of LGBTQ youth and their families often involves

the difficult decision of coming out to their families.

Harassment perpetrated by family members is often a deciding factor in the

willingness and ability of youth to come out to their parents. In her work with 22

nonheterosexual youth between the ages of 14 and 21, Grafsky (2018) argued that

coming out often allowed sexual minority youth to be closer to their families and live

authentic lives. Coming out was not always possible for everyone, as many sexual

minority youths are "often afraid of rejections or fear that the parent-child relationship

will be damaged as a result of disclosure" (p. 784). As such, many sexual minority

individuals choose to remain hidden from their families to avoid the "disclosure related

violence, verbal harassment, or other negative consequences that have been documented following disclosure to family" (p. 784). In all, rural LGBTQ youth are experiencing harassment in many foundational areas of their lives and finding accepting spaces proves difficult.

Harassment in school. The National Education Association Teacher Code of Ethics (2017) requires that educators "make [a] reasonable effort to protect the students from conditions harmful to learning or health and safety" (p. 1). Common examples of this protection include the following: teachers and staff wearing name badges to identify themselves as legitimate, school doors remaining locked when students are present, and several drills to prepare for the unthinkable intruder. These are among the many ways school professionals are protecting students from outside dangers. However, one must ask, are those same professionals devoting the same effort to protecting students from the many inside dangers of teasing, harassment, and bullying? Most evidence suggests they are not.

Results from a United States Climate Survey conducted in 2017 by GLSEN indicated that 98.5% of LGBTQ students heard the word 'gay' used negatively, 95.3% heard sexual orientation slurs, 94% heard negative remarks about gender expression, and 87.4% heard negative remarks about transgender individuals. Although many of these slurs happened in the presence of school staff, nearly half of the students reported that no intervention occurred. Arguably, the most alarming survey result indicated that 56.6% of students reported that their *teachers* were the source of gay slurs, and derogatory comments (GLSEN, 2017). For example, Daniel Ogloff, a rural Aldergrove teacher, British Columbia, taped the words "I'm gay" to the back of a student's jacket and then

allowed other students to take photos. Mr. Ogloff received a suspension, *not* for

homophobic harassment, but for participating in a "prank" (Loutzenheiser, 2015, pp. 107-

108).

LGBTQ individuals also indicated that 70.1% also endured verbal harassment,

28.9% endured physical harassment, and 12.4% indicated they experienced physical

assaults in school (GLSEN, 2017). In order to combat this harassment, many schools

have added policies intended to protect LGBTQ youth. Loutzenheiser (2015) critically

analyzed one of these safety policies enacted in rural Bulkley, British Columbia, to

determine if it effectively protected LGBT youth or instead singled them out as "other,"

thereby increasing abuse. As indicated by the following student testimony, the policy did

very little to change the school atmosphere.

> I can tell you about the verbal and physical harassment and abuse. I can tell you
>
> about being taunted and being yelled at and being spit on when you try to use the
>
> washroom that corresponds with your gender identity. (p. 105)

Many of the spaces intended to keep students safe are failing, as LGBTQ youth continue

to be harassed by their peers and teachers.

Supportive school personnel. Several factors contribute to the harassment

among LGBTQ youth in their schools. However, there are ways in which students might

find support and relief from these physical and emotionally harmful practices. Among

them are helpful and supportive adults. LGBTQ individuals indicate that supportive

school faculty and staff positively impact their school experiences (GLSEN, 2017). This

promising data indicated that "96.6% could identify at least one school staff member

whom they believed was supportive of LGBTQ students at their school, and 61.0% could identify six or more supportive school staff" (GLSEN, 2017, p. 58).

Fear. One prominent emotion LGBTQ individuals frequently experience is fear (e.g., Jones, 2015; GLSEN, 2017), and many suggest that attending school, something they are required to do daily, caused their fear. Results of a 2015 national online survey of 3,134 Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer (GLBTIQ) students in both rural and urban Australia indicated that "55% of rural GLBTIQ students felt safe at school compared to 65% urban students" (Jones, 2015, p. 47). LGBTQ individuals reported being fearful of discrimination, harassment, and harm from peers and school policies, including the denial of necessities such as gender-neutral bathrooms. Transgender individuals also reported that sex education programs often reinforced a male/female binary that "justified" harmful actions from heterosexual youth towards their "abnormal" transgender peers (Jones, 2015).

Current data indicates that LGBTQ individuals experience fear every day for many reasons (GLSEN, 2017). For example, six out of ten experienced fear because of sexual orientation and four in ten because of gender expression. Fear also resulted in one-third of students being absent from school, and one fifth reported transferring to another school. Fear was also a factor that prevented students from reporting harassment or assault to their teacher, as many suggested that reporting these incidents might worsen their situation (GLSEN, 2017). Regrettably, LGBTQ youth experience fear and insecurity every day—doing everyday things. As one student suggested,

> I was barred from using the boys' bathroom and when forced to use the girls' and
> I experienced frequent harassment and physical assault. I frequently went a whole

day without using the bathrooms, and this has led to severe health complications. (p. 15)

Isolation. Lack of acceptance from family, peers, and teachers often results in rural LGBTQ youth feeling isolated. Yarbrough's (2004) interviews with gay adolescents suggested that because rural areas are often conservative and hold heteronormative attitudes and prejudices, participants often felt isolated and disconnected from their communities. One participant described his rural life as "…like [a] raft on the ocean, but there is no one to throw you a line…no one to talk to…really alone…big time isolation" (pp. 137-138).

Isolation from families. Attending family events proved significantly isolating for rural GLBT individuals, especially those who had moved to urban areas and then returned home. Oswald (2002) asked 45 GLBT young adults if being openly gay in urban areas impacted how they acted and were treated when they returned to their rural homes to attend weddings. Most interviewees indicated that because rural weddings are tacitly heterosexual, families of GLBT attendees expected them to remain invisibly gay. Even if they were out to their family members, the rural wedding space expected them to go back. Generally, GLBT experiences at rural events resembled "don't ask don't tell" (p. 334).

Overall, acceptance from their conservative and heteronormative rural families required that GLBT youth hide their identities. These homophobic realities made living in or returning to rural spaces challenging and isolating for GLBT youth (Oswald, 2002). Many of the individuals in Oswald's study were able to move to urban spaces to find acceptance; however, relocating is not always possible, nor should it have to be.

Homelessness and rural LGBTQ youth. Family conflict often causes youth homelessness, and for LGBTQ individuals who have come out to their families, conflict is often the result. Based on a study conducted in Toronto, Canada, Abramovich (2016) argued that "identity-based conflict resulting from a young person coming out as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Two Spirit (LGBTQ2S) is the most prevalent cause of homelessness among queer and trans youth" (p. 87). Homelessness is hard to measure, however, because many LGBTQ2S youths do not make use of shelters and instead rely on extended family members or friends for temporary housing. This precarious situation, identified as "hidden homelessness" (p. 88), is even more prevalent in rural communities.

LGBTQ youth who decide to seek refuge in homeless shelters, however, are often met with further abuse and mistreatment. In their interviews with seven homeless youth and nine service providers in a northeastern city in the United States, Coolhart and Brown (2017) found that LGBTQ youth who use homeless shelters experience harmful practices. Participants in this study reported gender and sexual orientation segregation, mistreatment from straight individuals, and harassment based on religion.

More specifically, shelter staff placed transgender individuals in the gender category that didn't fit their identity. When LGBTQ homeless youth were open about their identity, their straight peers requested segregation. Participants also reported mistreatment by their straight peers. For example, the shelter staff said, "I've had an individual's clothes urinated on. Um, belongings urinated on, belongings stolen from them at their shelters um, pretty horrific stuff" (Coolhart & Brown, 2017, p. 234). Participants in this study also reported abuse from staff based on religious beliefs such as

being told "to get on their knees and repent for their LGBT lifestyle" (p. 234). Overall, safety shelters mistreat and abuse LGBTQ individuals instead of providing protection and safety.

Isolation from peers. LGBTQ youth often feel excluded from typical teenage activities attended by their same-aged straight peers, and activities specifically for LGBTQ individuals are often nonexistent. A national school climate survey indicated that 49% of those surveyed did not feel supported or included by their peers or biological family (GLSEN, 2017, p. 45). In response, LGBTQ youth often turn to adult members of the LGBTQ community who have the potential to address their needs and provide a sense of family (Russell & Bohan, 2005). Connection attempts between LGBT youth and adults, however, often present challenges due to a generational divide and the fear of adults "exploiting the vulnerability" (p. 6) of LGBT youth. Failed attempts for youth to find companionship with other gay members of the community (both peers and adults) often intensify feelings of isolation (GLSEN, 2017).

Isolation from peers is also a result of LGBT youth not having spaces where they can gather safely with their peers (both gay and straight). Lack of recreational space often contributes to minority stress, in which LGBT individuals have negative perceptions and uncertainties of their belonging in school (Heck, Lindquist, Steward, Brennand & Cochran, 2013). Primarily, their heterosexual peers can openly participate in school activities, sports, clubs, and school dances. In contrast, LGBT individuals either remain hidden or face exclusion, which often leads to stress and mental illness.

Spaces of inclusion. Although the above information indicates high levels of isolation among LGBTQ youth, they find places of acceptance and safety. Supportive

student clubs (including the GSA) serve as vital spaces of acceptance. Based on the results of a national school climate survey, 53.3% of participants reported their school had a GSA or a similar student club. Among students with a GSA in their school, over half (51.1%) said that they attended club meetings at least sometimes, and more than one-fifth (22.3%) had participated as a leader or an officer in their club (GLSEN, 2017). Overall, isolation is a significant factor in the lives of LGBTQ youth. However, GSAs are one way these individuals are finding spaces of acceptance in their school spaces.

  Substance abuse. Research suggests that rural LGBTQ individuals are more likely to abuse substances at an earlier age, in higher quantities, and are more likely to drive intoxicated than their straight peers (Cohn & Hastings, 2010). Possible reasons for their increased abuse include not meeting heteronormative expectations, lack of support from family and peers, and a lack of a safe community space to gather that does not involve alcohol (Cohn & Hastings, 2010; Yarbrough, 2004).

  Heteronormative pressures experienced by rural LGBTQ individuals are associated with a higher potential for drug and alcohol abuse. In their work with rural lesbians, Cohn and Hastings (2010) argued, "[rural areas have] a strong emphasis on bloodlines, the creation of family—presumably heterosexual family—and an emphasis on taking care of one's kinfolk" (p. 71). To meet these expectations, many rural LGBTQ individuals live as heterosexuals, get married, and have children. Living a false life often leaves one feeling isolated, thereby causing many to turn to drugs or alcohol to relieve mental anguish and pain. Heterosexual individuals often experiment with drugs and alcohol for rebellion and fun. LGBT youth use these substances to "fog an increasing

awareness that they are not heterosexual and to defend against the painful realization that being lesbian, or gay means a difficult life lies ahead" (Yarbrough, 2004, p. 131).

A lack of community spaces that LGBT youth might gather is associated with increased drug and alcohol abuse. Without said space, Yarbrough (2004) argued that "Bars [then become] an important social gathering place for gay males" (p. 131). As adolescents, LGBTQ youth find relief and support from drugs and alcohol instead of families, friends, and communities. Arguably, several factors may contribute to increased drug and alcohol abuse among adolescents; however, identifying as LGBTQ and living in rural areas seems significant.

Self-harm and suicide. Research suggests that suicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescents, and individuals who identify as LGBTQ are at an even higher risk. Whiting, Boone, & Cohn (2012) found that 41 of their 137 participants had attempted suicide at least once, and one-half of those reported multiple attempts. Factors contributing to these higher rates stem from increased levels of victimization that LGBTQ students experience in school. Results of a national school climate survey indicate that "63.2% of students who experienced higher levels of victimization based on sexual orientation demonstrated higher levels of depression compared to 39.1% of students who experienced lower levels of victimization" (GLSEN, 2017, p. 50). Higher levels of victimization often result in lower school attendance, poor grades, increased depression, self-harm, and suicide among LGBTQ youth (Bishop & McClellan, 2016; Hatzenbuehler, 2011; O'Connell et al., 2010). Simply put, non-acceptance in a homophobic society contributes to higher rates of self-harm and suicide.

Summary. Homophobia and transphobia impact LGBTQ individuals in life-altering ways and both contribute to harmful home and school environments that isolate young people and foster peer and family harassment. They also increase rates of substance abuse, self-harm, and suicide. The following section will describe how transphobia impacts transgender individuals differently than their cisgender LGB peers.

Transphobia

Transphobia is emotional disgust and negative attitudes toward individuals whose gender does not align with their gender assigned at birth or who do not conform to socially constructed gender expectations (e.g., Makwana, et al., 2018; Nagoshi et al., 2008). Because they may not conform to socially normalized sex and gender roles, transgender individuals face "societal discrimination and stigma" (Nagoshi et al., 2008, p. 521), including genderism and gender bashing. As suggested in a national school climate survey, transgender individuals reported more hostile school experiences that LGBQ cisgender peers (GLSEN, 2017). More specifically, 67% of transgender students in the midwestern state where this study took place, reported hearing negative remarks and hostile experiences (GLSEN, State Snapshot, 2017).

Transphobic indicators. Scholars suggest several dispositions that may contribute to transphobic beliefs and feelings within specific individuals. They include fundamental religiosity, right-wing ideologies, and socially constructed gender role beliefs. Each of these dispositions is unique; however, they all contribute to an aversion to individuals who do not conform to socially constructed order and rules (Makwana et al., 2018).

In two studies conducted in Great Britain and Belgium, Makwana et al. (2018), suggested that transphobic individuals often possess a Need for Closure (NFC) or the "desire for firm answers as opposed to confusion and ambiguity" (p. 207). Persons who scored high in NFC viewed gender as something assigned at birth, and view those who identify as anything other than birth assignments as unacceptable. More specifically, "NFC was significantly associated with transphobia because of a stronger adherence to social conventions and obedience to authorities (i.e., right-wing authoritarianism) and stronger endorsements to traditional gender roles" (p. 206). Mostly, transgender individuals are more likely to experience transphobia from groups who desire to maintain traditional power structures that uphold gender norms, including school officials and teachers.

Difficulty in research. Studies surrounding transphobia have proven difficult because estimated numbers of transgender youth in public schools are difficult to assess. Most school surveys inquire about binary (male/female) identities (Wernick, Kulick, & Chin, 2017). Surveys that did include transgender groups still posed a significant problem, as "individual experience [influenced] the lived realities of those who [considered] themselves to be 'trans' or 'transgender' in drastically different ways" (p. 918). For example, trans men assigned male at birth faced violence "in the policing of both binary gender norms" (p. 918), and anti-transgender violence and murderous attacks were significantly higher in trans women of color (Wernick et al., 2017). In order to access the enactments of transphobia, and the impact they have on transgender individuals, research must consider many intersections. As suggested by Wernick et al. (2017), "The grouping of non-cisgender people within a single category may conceal as

much diversity as it exposes, as the same move does with cisgender categories of 'men' and 'women'" (p. 918). Difficulty aside, transphobia significantly impacts our youth and demands considerable attention.

Transphobia and school. Due to societal transphobic attitudes and dispositions, transgender youth face many barriers and risks within their educational institutions. In their work with 1046 Midwestern high school students, Wernick et al. (2017) suggested that "Trans individuals face physical violence and harassment, disregard for their gender identity and expression, as well as curriculum and pedagogical practices that are harmful to their development" (p. 917).

Transgender individuals also experience stress, fear, and harassment in many areas of their school space, making their schools difficult to navigate. In work with 15 individuals whose ages ranged from 18-22, Johnson, Singh, and Gonzalez (2014) found that transgender youth often face exclusion from their straight and LGBQ peers. One participant said, "my gay friends all get mad at me and think I am abrasive and mean, just because I want them to call me he, instead of she. You would think they would understand" (p. 425). Without a shared sense of acceptance, participants often felt they could not succeed in school, and consequently dropped out.

In addition to feeling excluded from their school space, participants in this work also encountered a hostile school environment. Several participants were victims of physical abuse, and others lived with the daily fear they were "vulnerable to bullying and violence in schools as a result of having TQQ [transgender, queer and questioning] identities and expressions" (Johnson et al., 2014, p. 426). One participant described the fear he experienced during passing time. He suggested, "You shouldn't have to worry

about going from class to class and somebody bothering you. And teachers just letting that happen" (p. 428). Often the fear of possible abuse became a reality. One participant described, "I went in early to take a math test and, basically, this guy grabs me by the back of my jacket and pulls me into the bathroom and beats the crap out of me" (p. 426).

Segregation of bathrooms into male/female facilities also posed a significant threat to transgender individuals' safety and wellbeing. Studies conducted on transgender college students' access to bathrooms have indicated "adverse physical health, such as dehydration and urinary tract or bladder infections, from avoiding or waiting to use the bathroom" (p. 918). Overall, schools (possibly high schools) that operate in ways that maintain policies and bias towards transgender people "serve as sites for physical harm against them (Wernick et al., 2017, p. 918).

Student feelings and perceptions of bathroom safety also impacted transgender students' grade point average. In schools where gender-neutral bathrooms were not an option, students reported feeling unsafe, and the same students also reported lower grades than their cisgender peers. Wernick et al. (2017) further suggested that when gender-neutral bathrooms were accessible, transgender students (on average), earned higher grade point averages than their cisgender peers. Essentially,

> the negative effect of trans identity on overall grades is buffered by feelings of safety in the bathroom, and the inequality in grades between trans students and cisgender girls can be explained (in part) by trans students' lower feeling of safety in the bathroom. (p. 923)

Wernick et al. (2017) argued for additional studies; however, based on their findings, it seems that school policies and practices often impact transgender individuals differently than their cisgender peers.

Transphobia, Homophobia, and the Entire School

Research suggests that daily homophobic slurs and bullying contribute to an unwelcoming and unsafe school environment for all students. Norris, McGuire, and Stoltz (2018) argue that when students (both gay and straight) experienced or witnessed homophobic and transphobic bullying in their school space, they felt less safe. Based on a study conducted with 2000 junior high school students in the United Kingdom, researchers argued,

> witnessing bullying had negative effects on the mental health of students, even if those students had not been directly targeted or involved in bullying incidents (Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009). Therefore, witnessing victimization might contribute to a pervasive sense of unease and lack of safety for all students, even when students are not directly targeted or victimized. (p. 155)

In all, homophobic and transphobic victimization significantly impacts student mental health. Both LGBTQ and straight students who experienced harassment and threats had detrimental health outcomes. Norris et al. (2018) argued, "Homophobic victimization predicted suicidality in both heterosexual and LGBTQ youth, even after accounting for the effects of general discrimination" (p. 155).

Based on their work with 1046 Midwestern high school students, Wernick et al. (2017) argued that a school's anti-LGBTQ climate was significantly associated with lower success rates among all students. When the school climate negatively impacted its

LGBTQ population, the entire student body suffered, and when the school upheld inclusionary policies and practices, the entire student body benefitted. More specifically, "holistic interventions that simultaneously address everyday behaviors, policies, and institutional practices that marginalize LGBTQ people will also contribute to the positive self-determination of cisgender and heterosexual students" (p. 927).

Transphobia and Homophobia among LGBTQ Individuals.

Research suggests that homophobic and transphobic feelings and actions are also present among LGBTQ populations. In a study with 60 LGB undergraduate students, Warriner, Nagoshi, and Nagoshi (2013) found that participants harbored and enacted prejudicial feelings of internalized homophobia or "societal homophobic attitudes [among] lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people" (p. 1300). Religious and political dispositions cause internalized homophobia and transphobia, thereby prejudicing anyone outside these norms (Warriner et al., 2013). As society positions LGBTQ individuals outside of the norm, they often internalize these feelings towards themselves and other LGBTQ individuals. Although research suggests homophobia and transphobia among heterosexual and LGBTQ populations, each situation is unique.

Homophobia and transphobia were less frequent among LGBTQ participants than their straight peers, but for various reasons, these feelings and enactments were present. Warriner et al. (2013) suggested that homophobic and transphobic views varied based on how individuals perceived their position in society. More specifically, patriarchal structures (upheld by religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism) dictated that women's' sole source of power resided in heterosexual relationships. Because lesbian participants did not take advantage of this path to power, they often harbored

homophobic feelings and enactments towards themselves and others. As suggested in this study, "women may perceive that they can only gain power in a patriarchal society by having sex with or acting like a man. Therefore, for lesbians, their sexuality [represented] a loss of social power" (p. 1310).

Fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism did not correlate with homophobia among men. Instead, these societal structures contributed to higher levels of transphobia. As suggested by Warriner et al. (2013), patriarchal societies place male gender identities atop a hierarchy of power, and feminine men served to disrupt this structure. More specifically, both gay and straight males held prejudice towards those who presented as feminine. Overall, the perceived threat among males was not a result of sexual orientation, but instead gender presentation that disrupted males' privileged position within a patriarchal society.

Summary

In all, transphobia and homophobia and their impact warrant continued research, especially in LGBTQ populations (Greytak et al., 2013, Warriner et al., 2013), as their impact is widespread and harmful to the entire society. LGBTQ individuals face more significant harm than their straight, cisgender peers, but the detriments of these harmful practices surpass boundaries. Research conducted suggests that fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism play a significant role in homophobic and transphobic enactments but limiting oneself to these explanations is detrimental. Research must consider many more factors (and persons), but most importantly, it must include the voices of LGBTQ populations. Finally, most research surrounding LGBTQ individuals

has focused on risk instead of resilience. The following section includes the importance of resilience studies.

LGBTQ Resilience

Resilience studies among LGBTQ individuals have increased, but overall, scholars have neglected it. Russell (2005) suggested, "Given the predominant focus on risk in the existing research literature, the resilience of contemporary sexual minority youth is remarkably understudied" (p. 6). LGBTQ youth are successfully living their lives, and future research must acknowledge this reality and increase resilience studies (Russell, 2005). Instead of dwelling on risk, danger, and sadness, research might consider highlighting resilience and advocacy (Grossman, D'Augelli, & Frank, 2011).

Resilience, or the capacity to cope with adverse events or difficult circumstances in life, is an understudied topic, and research often emphasizes risk instead of resilience (Grossman et al., 2011). Because research indicates that LGBTQ youth are at higher risk for many types of abuse from their families, peers, and community members, future work must consider ways these individuals might cope with their abuses.

In their work with 55 transgender individuals between the ages of 15 and 21, Grossman et al. (2011) found that personal mastery, self-esteem, and social support were three critical coping skills (resilience) of transgender youth. When transgender youth were able to live as their identified gender and have the support of significant people in their lives, they experienced higher self-esteem. They were able to cope better with adversity in their lives. Overall, LGBTQ youth are successfully navigating their lives, but additional work with larger samples is needed.

Rural resilience. Some research surrounding LGBTQ youth suggests that rural spaces are the "taken for granted closet" (Gray, 2009, p. 4), and many youth suggest that coming out to family members results in isolation and rejection (Grafsky, 2018), but this is not always the case. Rural spaces are protective and accepting of their own, as being local contributes to LGBT individuals' wellbeing. When one is born and raised in a rural community, family and kinship seem to take precedence over how one identifies (Baker, 2016). Relatedly, Gray (2009) suggested that rural LGBTQ youth are actively making use of media and public spaces in order to contrast notions that "tether LGBT identities to the cities and closets to the rural community" (p. 4). LGBTQ individuals are making use of their status as "familiar locals" (p. 4) to claim their rural existence and happiness outside of the city. Gray further suggested future resilience research might serve to support the efforts of LGBTQ youth by

> [Challenging] the pervasive stereotypes of rural places as static and
> monolithically repressive and push us to rethink metrocentric assumptions of what
> it means or looks like to be 'isolated,' in need of 'outreach,' or 'out' in public
> spaces beyond the city's limits. (p. 30)

In many ways, LGBTQ youth are leading the charge to create spaces where everyone is accepted and supported.

Resilience at Boyton. Relevant to this study are my experiences with LGBTQ resistance at Boyton. Individuals in this school are not always in peril; they have successfully formed a GSA and found many spaces of acceptance and support in their school and community. These individuals are attending classes, participating in extracurricular activities maintaining long term friendships and relationships, going to

dances and movies, obtaining part-time jobs, attending family events, and happily living their teenage lives. LGBQ youth do face adversity and challenges, but they are also "[drawing] from beneficial sources of social support, possess feelings of social connectedness, and demonstrate a positive outlook on life" (Schmitz & Tyler, 2018, p. 3).

For example, GSA meetings in Boyton often result in members sharing their sadness and struggles as members of the LGBTQ community. However, some of our time together is spent laughing and discussing teenage activities (e.g., homework, siblings, significant others, jobs, and school happenings). LGBTQ life in a rural community is not always terrible. There is hope, happiness, and resistance among these young individuals, who are "not always marginalized; they are producers and claimants of space" (Schmidt, 2015, p. 268). LGBTQ resilience, however, often goes undocumented. One specific act of resilience at Boyton by the LGBTQ community and their allies was the performance of *The Laramie Project.*

Fine arts resilience at Boyton. In 1998, Matthew Shepard died tragically due to a homophobic hate crime in Laramie, Wyoming. Five weeks after his death occurred, Moisés Kaufman and the Tectronic Theater Project went to Laramie and conducted over 200 interviews with its residents. From those interviews, they composed *The Laramie Project*, which is a play based on events surrounding Sheppard's death. It powerfully portrays how rural homophobia was the fundamental cause of the horrific death of a gay man. In addition to the detailed realities of how homophobia had destroyed families and communities in Laramie, this play proposed ways in which hate turned into hope and love (Dunn, 2010).

A community-wide performance of *The Laramie Project* that took place in May of 2017 by the students of Boyton is an example of LGBTQ youth resilience. Repeatedly blocked and unsupported by the administration, the performance of this play was unprecedented in Boyton. Performers faced harmful ridicule and taunting by their peers for participating in "the gay play," and several cast members accepted their parts despite their parent's disapproval. Ignoring a lack of support and harmful remarks from many community and family members, the students of Boyton High School (both LGBTQ and straight) assumed their gender-neutral characters. They powerfully sent a message to their rural community that they would not ignore harmful and deadly homophobia. Performance of *The Laramie Project* also occurs in urban spaces, but at this time, in this context, its performance was a result of youth resilience in a rural school.

Concluding Thoughts and this Dissertation

The research included in this literature review suggests that homophobia and transphobia are prevalent globally, including our schools (Yarbrough, 2004; Nagoshi, Adams, Terrell, Hill, Brzuzy & Nagoshi, 2008). Scholars referenced in this review have also suggested that students in rural spaces and schools are more likely to experience these harmful practices. Others contrast that notion by suggesting that the rural space is accepting and safe. By categorizing this phenomenon in a binary fashion of safe versus unsafe, scholars leave much of the in-betweenness absent from the discussion. Simple answers are troublesome as they leave out any alternatives. As suggested by Ayers (2005), "Simple explanations that ignore complication in an impatient determination to get to the bottom line or root cause are worse than useless. They give a false impression that we have explained something when we have not" (p. 135).

Scholars have suggested the lack of research in rural spaces regarding homophobia and transphobia are due to an "urban bias" (Abelson, 2016), or the idea that LGBTQ individuals do not choose to live in rural spaces. Could this urban bias be perpetuated because we have gotten used to the story as told? Does rural research, and the generalizations that have resulted, need revising?

As suggested by Ayers (2005), any history accepted as "truth" is lacking. He further suggested that we often "like the current story too much to challenge it very deeply and that we foreclose questions by repeating familiar formulas" (p. 123). Have the stories of LGBTQ successes and resilience become an accepted "urban" story, or is it time to ask better questions? Is it time to ask better questions of those who have much better insight into the answers? Could the words and lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals in rural schools transform the fixed narrative of LGBTQ life in a rural school? Might their voices "[poke] holes in and through the conceptual bags and boxes into which we have tried to cram them" (Ayers, 2005, p. 176).

In a pilot study I conducted in 2019, participants indicated that the school within this study was not for them. During their interviews, they suggested that they did not see themselves in the curriculum or the school space. They described incidents in which their peers treated them as a "thing" instead of a person. They expressed their desire to openly share their lives with their family, which was impossible for some. Participants seemed to tell a similar story present in most research within the rural LGBTQ community. Based on this pilot study, Boyton's LGBQ students seem to fit into the "accepted" narrative or the boxes that Ayers (2005) described.

My hope for this dissertation is to question, analyze, and possibly challenge the "accepted" narrative through the individual stories, insights, and suggestions of LGBTQ students, their teachers, and administrators. My employment of space, spatial justice, and feminism is essential for analysis, but my participants' stories serve as the critical component. Their stories detail the multiple ways in which their rural school and community impacts their lives. By providing the space for them to share their lived experiences, I hope to form communities with the potential to recreate institutional spaces (in Boyton and beyond) in ways that empower and encompass everyone who enters.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Research Setting

This research took place during the 2019-2020 school year at Boyton High School (pseudonym) in the rural Midwestern city of Boyton (population < 5000) located approximately 50 miles west of a major metropolitan area. As the term rural is multidimensional and has a "dizzying array of definitions" (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008, p. 290), I must specify my use of the term rural. For this dissertation, rural means "outside of urban boundaries…[including] some set of towns and villages below a chosen population threshold" (p. 31) of less than 10,000 residents.

Despite its small population, Boyton has many small and large businesses, a local police force, a well-established medical facility, fire station, and ambulance service. It also has a community center, several youth sports facilities, and abundant public parks. Crime rates in Boyton have increased alongside population, but based on total crimes committed per capita, Boyton is considered one of the safest regions in the United States

(Inside Prison, 2017). Boyton was also named a Yellow Ribbon City in 2007 for its dedication and support of service members and their families.

Socioeconomic data surrounding median income, homeownership, and poverty levels indicate the high-SES status of Boyton residents. More specifically, the median income is $82,592, which is above the national average of $57,652. The average home cost is $167,100, which falls below the national average of $217,000, and 77.1% of residents own their own homes, which is above the national average of 63.9%. Poverty levels in Boyton are at 1.95%, which is far lower than the national average of 13.4% (Data USA, 2017).

I included the above information to describe this rural space better and not compare Boyton to the broader rural space. Including this data may shed light on how Boyton's conditions may impact its members' lived experiences. Based on the SES statistics, most of Boyton's residents seem to be living a financially stable life, but how might this impact someone who is not in this majority? Does living in Boyton, while being part of the minority, make one stand out even more? Does high SES contribute more significant harm to those who are lower SES?

However, when looking closer at Boyton, several other factors may also contribute to this space being less desirable for many members of its population. First, its location is in one of the more conservative pockets within this traditionally liberal-leaning state (270 to Win). As one student suggested in a national school climate survey, "Honestly, it's a nightmare being part of the LGBTQ community in school, especially in a mostly conservative, rural area" (GLSEN, 2017, p. 15). Similarly, a participant in my

pilot study conducted in Boyton referred to the "hard right" leanings of her community as reasons for aggressive homophobia and bullying actions towards LGBTQ individuals.

Racial construction and the lack of racial diversity in this rural community may also contribute to this space being less desirable to some members. More specifically, residents who do not identify as white (8%) may be dismissed by this community as their presence has the potential to disrupt what Halloway (2006) named "privileged whiteness" (p. 8). This notion that rural spaces are "white" may contribute to a misconception that racism does not exist, thereby fostering disbelief and inaction when racism and racists actions occur.

Another quality of importance in Boyton is its religious leanings. A Google search reveals that there are thirty churches located either in this community or nearby. Most of these churches are Christian (including Catholic, Lutheran, and Evangelical free) in their denomination, and many students are active participants in youth groups. Official school policy states that teachers may not assign homework on Wednesdays, as it is considered church night (*Boyton Student Handbook*, 2018-2019).

Religiosity and attendance at church activities are often associated with resilience among individuals at high risk for depression (Kasen, Wickramaratne, Gameroff, & Weissman, 2012), which may prove beneficial to members of Boyton's LGBTQ community. Recently, one of our Lutheran churches hired an openly gay pastor who lives in Boyton with her wife and children. Members of GSA discuss her presence at meetings, and most are glad to have this representation even if they do not attend services. In all, religion in Boyton may help members of its community; however, religion might be a point of exclusion for some of its residents'.

Research suggests that rural Midwestern communities who possess specific

qualities such as highly conservative, religious, and homogenously white, often

experience higher incidents of homophobia (Boyland, Kirkeby, & Boyland, 2018).

Boyton is no exception, as it possesses all these characteristics. Political positionality and

religious leanings place this community within a right-wing level of tolerance, which is

often known to be intolerant and homophobic (Avery, 2002). Because family and

community dispositions often shape young people's attitudes and behaviors, Boyton

individuals are cultured to believe that homosexuality is "aberrant, if not immoral,

behavior" (Avery, 2002, p. 192). Boyton may not be spatially unique, but its hegemonic

political leanings and religious membership may be significant factors contributing to the

homophobia participants experience. The make-up of space is not permanent; any

change, whether drastic or slight, has the potential to remake its spatial construction.

Ayers (2005) argued,

> All social life is 'contingent,' implicated and unpredictable because all parts of
>
> life depend on one another. What we think of as public and private, economic,
>
> and political, religious, and secular, and military and civilian are deeply
>
> connected. Social change can start anywhere and lead anywhere. As a result, the
>
> most profound kinds of self-understanding can change radically and abruptly. (p.
>
> 135)

Boyton High School. The community of Boyton also has an independent school

district. The total student population at Boyton High School is 923, with 92.5% of the

students reported as being white, 0.6% American Indian, 1.1% Asian, 2.8% Hispanic, and

0.7% reported as Black. 15.1% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 13.1%

qualify for special education services. Schools within this community are rated by Niche (2019) as 83rd out of 350 in safety.

Students in this district have access to a wide range of courses, both required and elective, including several concurrent enrollment courses where they may simultaneously earn high school and college credit. Government data collected from this Midwestern state indicates that graduation rates since 2018 averaged 95%, and 71% of those who graduated transitioned to postsecondary programs (Minnesota Department of Education, 2018). Students in this district also have access to a wide variety of activities, including athletics and fine arts. Many Boyton residents (and participants in this work) indicate they moved to this community because of its schools.

Location selection. I chose the location of this study for three reasons. First, this work focuses on homophobia and transphobia in rural spaces, and Boyton fulfills that requirement. Second, Boyton has a high school from where I gained participants. Finally, I am a rural insider to this community and school. I have lived in this community for over 20 years and have taught at Boyton High School for 27 years. Because of this, I possess insider knowledge of policies, practices, and traditions that an outside researcher may not have. Overall, I believe that conducting research and examining concerns in my own "house" (M. Engman, personal communication, June 5, 2019) may allow for a change within this rural community, which may also impact a greater audience.

Insider status might provide me with the insight and knowledge that an outsider might not have; however, it may also contribute to my own bias. Because I care a great deal for this school and the students, I may be prone to casting a positive light on current practices, activities, and happenings. In that same respect, my witnessing of the many

discriminatory, exclusionary, and harmful dispositions and practices for 27 years may

cloud my vision towards progress. I considered these biases in my analysis.

Recruitment of Participants

        Gender and Sexuality Alliance members. I drew participants for my interviews

from the Gender and Sexuality Alliance, who identify as LGBTQ. Ten individuals,

ranging in age from 14-18 who identify as LGBTQ, agreed to participate in semi-

structured interviews. In addition to student members of the GSA, I also interviewed a

Boyton teacher Lou, who is their advisor. She is responsible for starting and supporting

this club since its inception in 2003 and is a well-known advocate of LGBTQ students at

Boyton. GSA meets in my classroom on Wednesday afternoons, and I am a co-advisor of

this group; therefore, my presence did not seem odd.

        Non-members of the GSA. In addition to members of the GSA, I approached

individuals who had openly been unsupportive of the GSA. These individuals openly said

that they did not "believe" in the GSA, and do not think the club should exist. These

individuals have bragged about tearing down the GSA club meeting signs. One individual

agreed to an interview, but all others I approached declined participation. I was also able

to interview the teacher whose students tore down the GSA signs, and she described to

me her conversations with the individuals responsible.

        Participants in LGBTQ staff development. Participants in this work also

included two teachers and three administrators from Boyton high school and middle

school who participated in a two-hour staff training on LGBTQ student issues and

strategies. More specifically, staff attended a workshop before school started in the fall to

address concepts such as gender identity, names, and pronouns, as well as ways that

teachers might address homophobic and transphobic bullying. Teachers volunteered based on my request for participants at the staff training, and administrators agreed based on my email requests for interviews. I did not ask this group of individuals how they identify.

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Research Design

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Ethnographic Participant-Observer Case Study

The method of inquiry for this dissertation is qualitative. More specifically, it is an ethnographic study that examined enactments of and resistance to homophobia and transphobia in a rural school. It individually considered participants' words, actions, and lived experiences. As a rural insider and teacher, I hope this dissertation might contribute to new understandings in a rural space that may apply to rural and non-rural spaces beyond Boyton.

Practitioner as researcher. I argue that reflective practices, such as practitioner research, are inherent to good teaching — excellent teachers continually analyze classroom and school practices and then make changes based on their analysis. Campbell (2013) argued, however, that "there is a distinction between observant, thoughtful teaching, and practitioner research" (p. 2). She instead suggested that practitioner research and the findings gained have the power to change practices beyond that of a single teacher. Data, analysis, and findings of practitioner research typically reach a larger audience and may impact the practices and policies beyond the individual teacher/researcher classroom. Campbell further called for an increase in practitioner research, because it has the power to improve educational research as a whole. One specific improvement may be a reduction in the researcher/practitioner divide.

Researcher/practitioner divide. One concern surrounding educational research is the divide that may exist between theory and practice. More specifically, research at the university level and the findings that emerge are not reaching in-service practitioners. Kosnick and Beck (2000) suggested infrequency stems from the idea that university-level researchers frown on this type of research and deem it inappropriate to research current students. Specifically, university researchers perceive action research as "lacking an academic tone and rigor" (p. 3). However, the research/practitioner divide may be one of the last obstacles that prevent essential research from reaching the hands of practicing teachers. If in-service teachers were researching their schools, the findings of said work might have a better chance of reaching students.

Self-study and the social studies. Preparing students to participate in a democratic society is one of the main tasks of Social Studies (SST) education (Barton & Levstik, 2004; NCSS, 2001). Social studies educators may accomplish this task by participating in self-study. Hostetler (2012) suggested that self-study has the "potential to empower teachers to shape or reshape classrooms, schools, policies, and practices in ways that improve teaching and learning for democratic purposes" (p. 78). Furthermore, when paired with critical theory, self-study allows teachers to push back on the hierarchy that often dictates teaching practices in ways that foster student and teacher empowerment. In my case, a participant-observer methodology might allow for my work in social studies education to challenge the heteronormative structures that serve to block the democratic ambitions of social studies education.

Beyond the classroom space. The use of critical theory might also find its way into school spaces via activities outside the classroom. In what Mayo (2013) described as

a "third space" of learning, members of a well-established high school GSA and their advisor engaged in a critical pedagogy that "[brought] practitioner and academic knowledge together in less hierarchical ways to create new learning opportunities for prospective teachers" (p. 267). Essentially, members of the GSA participated in advisor led activities that heightened their awareness of "their privileged positionality; [opened] students' eyes to injustices around them in new ways; and [changed] their orientation to 'activist' which [led] them to take action at school and in the larger community" (p. 266). In all, the potential for creating and supporting inclusive learning environments can (and should) happen in spaces beyond the classroom. Citing Mayo:

> Critical pedagogy must be practiced across multiple club and disciplinary settings in schools, disrupting some of the boundaries found between curricular and extracurricular activities. In this new space, future (and current) teachers will be better equipped to meet the needs of all their students, queer and straight alike. (p. 274)

Methodology

Semi-structured Interviews

Similar to Talmy (2010), this work employed a method of interview as social practice. It required a movement beyond the "*whats*" of the interview and instead consider both the "*whats and hows*, that is, the content *and* the 'interactional [and] narrative procedure of knowledge production'" (p. 131). Therefore, instead of mining information from participants and reporting what the interviewee "said," this work includes the voices of individuals who are,

transformed from a 'passive vessel of answers' to someone who not only holds the facts and details of experience, but, in the very process of offering them up for response, constructively adds to, takes away from, and transforms the facts and details. (p. 131)

This work also employed what Seidman (2013) described as a phenomenological approach to interviewing, which allowed participants to share their lived experiences. Keeping in mind that it is "never possible to understand another perfectly" (p. 17), phenomenological research hopes to come as close as possible by taking their words seriously and allowing researchers to ask further questions when appropriate. Specifically, this study might provide LGBTQ individuals and staff in a rural school the opportunity to share and co-construct their meanings with someone who might contextually recognize their descriptions.

For the following reasons, I also employed a method of interviewing similar to that of critical scholars. First, critical methods require that researchers acknowledge their biases and limitations when working with persons with whom they do not identify. My recognition of biases is essential, as I do not identify as LGBTQ and can never fully understand the homophobia and transphobia these individuals experience. Acknowledgment of my biases with adult participants is also essential because, in many ways, I can identify with their struggles and responsibilities. However, my investment in this work may leave me critical of their (un)knowing.

Second, similar to interviews as social practice, a critical method seeks to move to interview as a method from "what is" to "what could be" (Madison, 2005, p. 5). Essentially, by featuring the lived experiences of my participants, I hope to offer

suggestions that may contribute to resistance of homophobic and transphobic actions, disrupt the heteronormativity prevalent in our society and its institutions, and inspire social change that might improve the lives of LGBTQ students.

I conducted semi-structured interviews for this dissertation. First, I felt that individual interviews might allow for comparative responses to the same set of questions, while also allowing participants to respond with personal insights. Second, participants experiences surrounding the questions within this study might be considered emotional and based on sensitive issues. I felt that private interviews might provide participants with greater comfort and less stress while answering. Third, interviews may foster an informal conversation, based on memories and experiences, and an informal conversation, versus a questionnaire, seemed an appropriate site for these discussions. Finally, I chose this method because it aligns with feminist theory, which insists on including individual stories.

Seidman (2013) suggested, "To hold the conviction that we know enough already and don't need to know others' stories is not only anti-intellectual; it leaves us, at one extreme, prone to the violence of others" (p. 9). Interviews took place in a private room at school and lasted between 20-60 minutes.

Interview protocol with students. I interviewed ten individuals who are members of the GSA. I also interviewed one individual who tore down a GSA meeting sign. To allow for greater comfort, I conducted interviews after school in a private/office room on campus (rooms varied based on participant request/convenience). GSA participants were asked 17 identical questions, with the final question allowing for

expanded personal insight. The individual who tore down the GSA sign was asked 11

questions with the final question allowing for expanded personal insight.

I conducted, recorded, and transcribed verbatim all interviews in Microsoft Word.

To protect the confidentiality of participants, I assigned a pseudonym attached to their

written transcription. The master list of participants' names, recordings, and permission

forms are in a locked safe separate from transcriptions.

Interview protocol with adults. I interviewed one teacher who witnessed the

tearing down of GSA signs and the GSA advisor. I also interviewed two teachers and

three administrators who participated in a professional development session on strategies

for supporting LGBTQ youth. Interviews with adults took place in a private classroom or

office. I asked seven questions of the teacher who witnessed the tearing down of a GSA

sign, and I asked the GSA advisor nine questions. I asked seven questions of participants

(both teachers and administrators) who participated in the LGBTQ professional

development session. I conducted, recorded, and transcribed verbatim all interviews in

Microsoft Word. To protect the confidentiality of participants, I assigned a pseudonym

attached to their written transcription. The master list of participants' names, recordings,

and permission forms are in a locked safe separate from transcriptions.

Interview protocol with all participants. After I conducted the interviews, I

repeatedly listened to and transcribed them in Microsoft Word. My transcription process

included a "rigorous and thorough 'orthographic' transcript—a verbatim account of all

[verbal] utterances" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 88). I then reviewed interviews and

transcriptions, checking for accuracy. During my final transcription session, I listened for

any emphasis participants placed on specific words or phrases that better-reflected emotions attached to those words.

I was aware that participants' answers to these questions were dependent on individual understandings of what my questions meant, and my recognition of this was essential during my analysis. Also, my questioning style, including my comments or silence, may have impacted the story my participants told (Mishler, 1986). I am also aware that for several of my participants, I am their teacher, which may have impacted what they chose to share. More information surrounding participant responses is included in chapter seven. Interview questions are included in the appendices of this dissertation.

Member Checks

My positionality prevents me from genuinely putting into words the homophobia and transphobia experienced by LGBTQ individuals in this study. Rhodes (1997) questions the ability of researchers to describe a group's self-representations to which they are not a member. He does not provide a concrete answer to this question but suggests that member checks might "play a role in 'checking' or validating the trustworthiness of the research interpretations" (p. 21). Therefore, I was mindful not to speak for my participants, and instead allow their words and lived experiences to tell their stories. I hoped to provide room for these stories through member checks or "actively involving research participants in checking and confirming the results" (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016, p. 1802).

Member checks are a method used by qualitative researchers intended to "[ensure] that participants' meanings and perspectives are represented and not curtailed by the researchers' agenda and knowledge" (Birt et al., 2016, p. 1803). As such, I *offered*

participants an opportunity to review their words by emailing them verbatim transcripts. Participants had the opportunity to email or discuss in person any "extracts they [felt] no longer [represented] their experience, or that they [felt] negatively [presented] them" (p. 1803). If they had no concerns or questions, they chose not to respond. Several participants responded with permission to move forward with their words, but the majority did not respond.

Data Analysis

I employed a thematic approach in my analysis of the interview data. Braun and Clark (2006) suggested that thematic analysis is one of the foundational methods in qualitative work and, "Through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of the data" (p. 78). A thematic approach is also an "accessible form of analysis" (p. 81) for new qualitative researchers, which accurately describes me.

Although a thematic analysis is typically more accessible to new researchers, Braun and Clark (2006) suggest that researchers consider several items before its execution. More specifically, before a thematic analysis occurs, there are several ongoing reflexive questions to be asked. Questions I considered in my analysis included: (a) my choice of codes and themes, (b) where themes came from (entire data corpus or a specific data set), and (c) would there be a reliance on previous literature in identifying themes? As I worked through my analysis, I answered the above questions in the following manner: (a) my research questions guided codes and themes, (b) codes and themes originated from the entire data corpus, and (c) my analysis relied upon previous literature and theoretical considerations contained in this work.

My theoretical framework of space, spatial justice, and feminism guided my analysis. First, spatial theory suggests that human actions, reactions, and identities are often dependent on the make-up of the space in which they occur. Essentially, the uniqueness of this rural community and school impacted participant experiences with homophobic enactments. Spatial justice and feminism also guided my analysis. They both align with my overall goal of purposefully including the voices and lived experiences of LGBTQ students (and staff) in a rural school, as their voices hold the potential to reorganize this space.

Data analysis protocol. After I conducted interviews, I repeatedly listened to and transcribed them. My transcription process included a "rigorous and thorough 'orthographic' transcript—a verbatim account of all [verbal] utterances" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 88). I then reviewed interviews and transcriptions, checking for accuracy. During my final transcription session, I listened for any emphasis participants placed on specific words or phrases that better-reflected emotions attached to those words.

Data analysis for student interviews. I began my process of thematically coding the interview data. Similar to Patton (2002), I organized interview data into themes based on a coding process guided by the following questions: (a) How do LGBTQ youth and their allies at one rural school characterize their experiences with gender and sexual identity, (b) What is the role of this high school space within these characterizations, (c) What is the role of the rural community within these characterizations? I then re-read each transcript several times, making notes in the margins of recurring patterns and themes based on my guiding questions. Finally, I cut apart individual interview transcripts and reorganized them into new transcripts surrounding my guiding questions.

After thematically analyzing and organizing interview data, I decided the best way to present findings would be using a methodology called composite narrative.

Composite Narrative. My method of presenting findings in this dissertation is a composite narrative. This methodology, one in which the researcher combines the data from multiple interviews to form a single narrative, allows for the lived experiences of participants while accomplishing what Willis (2019) referred to as "an authentic yet anonymous story" (p. 472). As several of my participants suggested, they were not out to some of their classmates, and family members, "composite narratives [might] provide an effective means of presenting anonymized interview data, while maintaining the richness and complexity of personal stories" (p. 478).

I used the voices of 10 individuals who identify as LGBTQ to create three fictitiously named characters Jamie, Charlie, and Justice. Although their names are fictitious, their experiences are not. Everything included in the individual narratives was taken directly from participant interview transcripts. Participants in this work are between the ages of 14-18, they are all white, seven identify as female, one identifies as transmale, and two identify as gender fluid.

I organized the individual narratives based on participants' age and identity. Interview data from four individuals who are 14 or 15 years old and identify as female were used to create the character of Jamie. Three of these individuals identify as lesbian, and one said they are not straight, but beyond that are unsure of their sexual orientation. Interview data from three participants ranging in age from 16-18 who all identify as female make up Charlie's character. One participant identified as lesbian, one as gay, and one indicated she was unsure of her sexual orientation. Interview data from three

individuals who range in age from 14-17 and identify as transmale and gender fluid (non-binary gender that is not fixed and capable of changing over time) make up the character of Justice. One participant identified as pansexual, and two indicated they like girls. I chose to include an older participant in Justice's narrative because I felt gender identity (within this study) had a higher degree of importance than age (refer to table 1).

Table 1: *Composite Narrative Identities*

Name	Jamie	Charlie	Justice
Age	3 aged 14 1 aged 15	2 aged 17 1 aged 18	2 aged 14 1 aged 17
Gender	4 self-identify as female	3 self-identify as female	1 self-identify as trans-male 2 self-identify as gender fluid
Sexuality	3 self-identify as lesbian 1 unsure of sexual orientation	1 identified as lesbian 1 identified as gay 1 unsure of sexual orientation	1self-identifes as pansexual 2 indicated "I like girls"

I chose to create my narratives surrounding age and identity for two specific reasons. First, during my transcription process and initial analysis of the data, participant dispositions towards their school and community stood out. Primarily, younger participants seemed more detailed and focused on their descriptions surrounding their family, whereas older individuals spent more time describing their experiences in school and with their peers. The amount of time participants attended high school could be the cause of their different foci but whatever the reason, it seemed an essential part of my participants' lived experiences and, therefore, guided my narrative construction. I also decided to include a separate narrative for participants who identify as transgender or

gender fluid, because these individuals shared similar stories as their lesbian and gay

peers. However, the uniqueness of their experiences warranted distinction. I based each

of the narratives on the lived experiences and voices of my participants. Their words may

apply to the broader LGBTQ community, but their stories do not define the overall

LGBTQ experience.

After repeated readings, I separated and reconstructed interview transcripts. I then

chose to organize all three narratives in a similar order addressing similar topics based on

my guiding questions. I chose to do this because descriptions of participants' lives

seemed to highlight similar experiences. These similarities may have been a result of all

participants answering almost identical interview questions in the same order. However,

the organizing of stories in a similar fashion might highlight (dis)similar ways in which

each participant characterized their lives in Boyton.

In addition to organizing narratives according to experiences, I also chose to

organize them similar to that of a rhetorical narrative, which typically includes the five

components of character, setting, problem, event, and resolution. Feldman, Skoldberg,

Brown, and Horner (2004) suggest the "use and usefulness of a method for analyzing

narratives that is based in concepts from classical rhetoric... [This] method allows

researchers to make more available the unstated, implicit understandings that underlie the

stories people tell" (p. 147).

Therefore, each narrative will follow a similar path that includes: (a) character, or

the personal descriptors of how participants came to live in Boyton and how they

described coming out to their family, peers, and the community (b) setting, or participant

descriptions and characterizations of Boyton including their peers, school, and the

community, (c) problems, or participant descriptions of problems they encounter within their curriculum, teachers, and school policies, (d) events, or how participants have found specific spaces in school to be (un)helpful, and finally (e), resolution, or how participants describe their future in Boyton (refer to table 2)

Table 2: *Narrative Organization*

Character	Setting	Problems	Events and (un)helpful Spaces	Resolution
Living in Boyton Coming out in Boyton	Relationships Peers School Community	Curriculum Teachers School Policies	GSA Extra-Curriculars	Future in Boyton

In addition to this order, I noticed that all participants indicated positive experiences at school, with their families, and in their community. However, in most situations, there was an addendum to their descriptions. In most ways, their descriptions indicated that their school, family, and community are working towards safety, inclusion, and acceptance, but these efforts seem ingenuine and inconsistent.

As indicated above, findings in this dissertation are in the form of composite narrative. Each character, Jamie, Charlie, and Justice have a chapter organized in a rhetorical narrative format. I based sections of the narratives on my guiding questions and themes within the interview data. Participant narratives make up chapters four, five, and six.

Interview length. This dissertation employs a methodology of semi-structured interviews. Because of this, I did not expect nor restrict the time or length of interviews. Instead, I followed the guidance of Seidman (2013), who suggests that researchers allow

for "enough openness for participants to tell their stories" (p. 23) yet maintain semi-structure by asking participants identical questions. Therefore, interview times varied between participants. Overall, participants who make up Jamie's character spoke to me for a total of 1 hr 30 minutes. Individuals who make up Charlie talked to me for 2 hrs 38 minutes, and individuals who make up Justice spoke to me for 1 hr 27 minutes. These variations in time and, therefore, the data available, may or may not impact findings.

Table 3: *Interview Length*

Participants	Interview Length
Jamie (4 individuals)	1 hr 30 minutes
Charlie (3 Individuals)	2 hr 28 minutes
Justice (3 individuals)	1 hr 27 minutes

Data analysis for adult participants. In addition to interviews with LGBTQ individuals, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers and principals. My goal for these interviews was for participants to consider the impact an LGBTQ staff development had on their thinking. Similar to student narratives, I thematically analyzed their interview data and organized themes based on a coding process guided by the following questions (Patton, 2002): (a) How did LGBTQ staff training impact your thinking, (b) How did the LGBTQ staff training impact your teaching? I then re-read each transcript several times, making notes in the margins of recurring patterns and themes based on guiding questions. Participants repeated two themes, which included: (a) participants indications this professional development was essential and, (b) the session on pronouns was most helpful and provided a new sense of confidence to address

homophobic/transphobic bullying in school. Similar to student composite narratives, I eliminated the vocalized pauses from adult transcripts (Seidman, 2013). Analysis of these guiding questions will be presented in chapter seven.

Spatial Construction of Boyton

In addition to discussing their professional development, adult participants also discussed the spatial makeup of Boyton. As space is a foundational component in this work, I will preface my character narratives with Boyton's spatial descriptions based on interview data from teachers and administrators. Gray, Johnson, and Gilley (2016) argue, "Today more than ever, space matters where the politics of gender and sexuality in the United States are concerned, not because it is so powerfully determinative, but because its effects are so wildly unpredictable" (p. 7)

Lived Experiences of School Staff

When I walked in, I remember thinking, they all look exactly the same, and that was really an eye opener for me. That everybody really needs to fit in—they have to conform to what that status quo is, or they get ostracized.

-Lou (2019)

Introduction

In addition to the LGBTQ individuals interviewed for this work, I interviewed four teachers and three administrators. Three of the individuals featured in this segment have been in Boyton upwards of 15 years, and three have been with the district for less than five years. All six individuals are white and based on nameplates created in the staff development session; four identify as female, and two identify as male. Their words and lived experiences working in Boyton provide additional insight into the spatial construction of this community and school district. Like Jamie, Charlie, and Justice's narratives, I have eliminated the vocalized pauses from adult transcripts (Seidman 2013).

Adult participants in this dissertation described how the construction of Boyton often impacts its members. For example, many Boyton residents (as indicated earlier) fall within a high socioeconomic status. In addition, the conservative and religious leanings seemingly dictate the actions and reactions of its population. Schmidt (2015) argued, "understanding inequity requires attention to space, for it is the production and engagement with space that inequity becomes entrenched in our social experiences" (p. 254).

Socioeconomic Status

When asked to describe her experiences as a teacher in Boyton, Lou described her initial impression and experiences with high socioeconomic status, and how she perceives it impacts students.

> When I first got here, I was really shocked by the amount of wealth in this school and the students that had wealth. I remember telling kids how excited I was that there was a pool in the building. And they were like 'what's the big deal?' I said, oh my gosh, when I was younger we had to drive on a school bus a half an hour to the nearest town to take swimming lessons, and we only got to do that for two weeks in the summer and the kid said 'I have a pool in my backyard.' I was like *oh*, that's totally the difference. So, that was my first impression. And I just felt like everybody tried to look the same here. Like when I walked in, I remember thinking, they all look exactly the same, and that was really an eye opener for me. That everybody really needs to fit in—they have to conform to what that status quo is, or they get ostracized.

Political Construction

When asked about his experiences as an administrator at Boyton, this individual commented on its conservative leanings. He suggested,

I had heard this as I started. That it's a conservative community that expects us to treat student issues conservatively-- and I *have* seen that…along with the conservative nature of some kids. They haven't been exposed to much outside of this area, or of this culture. And I haven't seen a large movement of kids against certain communities. But [there is an] underlying tone of the conservativism and not accepting of differences.

Religious Construction

Members of the GSA frequently report hearing comments of religious beliefs surrounding their queer identities. Boyton teacher and GSA advisor Lou also commented on the religious presence in Boyton. When asked what she wished was different about Boyton, she commented on its religious presence. She described this group has existed in Boyton for so long that "people live in fear of them, and anybody that is new coming in just doesn't want to be a target." Citing Lou,

I don't really know a nice way to say it—so I'm just going to say it. The overly religious people are very, very, vocal. And to me that is very ironic [because] they are so hateful of people that have different beliefs than them. And I just think that is ironic. To be that religious and then be hateful and discriminatory of other people. So, that would be my biggest thing that I have an issue with. And that's not just with LGBTQ, [it is the same] with any other difference or skin color because they don't like any kind of change or difference.

Students at Boyton are also vocal about their religious beliefs. Bobbie, who has taught in Boyton for 22 years, described her experiences at the beginning of the school year. Citing Bobbie, "For example, at the beginning of the school year, when we posted those signs *All are Welcome* with the rainbow, someone said; well that really ruins my day to see that." When she asked the student about this statement, they responded "it's abnormal and it's against the bible. That lifestyle."

Close-minded

When asked about her experiences as a teacher in Boyton, Avery, a third-year teacher, described "how unaccepting some kids are—about the people who are different than they are" She continued.

So, I think that was the most jarring, the lack of open-mindedness. Not necessarily having a strong opinion, but the lack of wanting to accept anything that is different from what they have grown up with, or what they hear from their friends. I think it seems that those who don't fit into the mainstream have a lot of issues. Like the student I had in homebound today. I asked her if she was dressing up for Halloween, and she said, 'No people don't like Black people.' And that was the reason for not going trick or treating just because she was scared. I mean there are some kids here who really care and do want to make a difference in their own community and want to change that mindset, but I think they have the weaker voice in terms of the student population.

Summary

Echoing many of the words of LGBTQ participants, adults describe the spatial construction of Boyton as possible reasons that even though there are signs on classroom

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doors indicating "*Everyone Welcome*," those words do not always ring true. Wealth,

religious beliefs, and political dispositions of this space prove exclusionary for many.

Addie, a third-year teacher in Boyton, described it as a "bubble." Citing Addie,

> I think in Boyton we tend to be in a bubble. I love working here, but if I were to
>
> ever leave the district it would be because of the community. I know there are
>
> [teachers] who don't agree with [LGBTQ identities], but at the end of the day [we
>
> have to ask ourselves], how are we supporting those kids? That is what matters.

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Chapter Four: Jamie

I based Jamie's character on interview data from the lived experiences of four white participants aged 14 and 15. Three of these individuals self-identify as female and lesbian, while one participant indicated she identifies as female but was unsure of her sexual orientation. For the most part, Jamie's words are taken verbatim from her transcript; however, in many instances, I followed the suggestions of Seidman (2013), who chose to eliminate the vocalized pauses of participants. Seidman suggested eliminating the

> characteristics of oral speech that a participant would not use in writing—for example, repetitious 'uhms, 'ahs,' you knows,' and other such idiosyncrasies that do not do the participant justice in a written version of what he or she has said. (p. 124)

I continued with this protocol in the narratives of Charlie and Justice.

Jamie and I had her interview session in a private classroom at Boyton High School, and even though we were alone in the interview room, there were many typical "school" noises happening all around us. The air was full of sounds from an after-school speech meeting, lockers opening and closing, janitors cleaning up, and buzzing intercom announcements. Amongst the activity, Jamie began her interview by describing how she came to live in Boyton, and how her experiences in this small town and high school have impacted her life.

Character

Living in Boyton

In describing her residency and education, Jamie said that her family moved to Boyton early in her life, and she has always gone to Boyton High School. She went on to describe her impressions of Boyton schools. Jamie provided suggestions similar to a national school climate survey in which participants indicated that supportive school faculty and staff positively impact the school experiences for LGBTQ individuals (GLSEN, 2017). Citing Jamie,

> I really like how serious Boyton is about—I feel like they put a lot [into] learning. And helping kids learn. And I think that's really important, because almost every teacher I have had—you can see in their eyes how much they like [to] give kids knowledge and [want] to put in the energy into it.

Overall, Jamie seemed to appreciate her school and her teachers' level of care for her education, thereby positively impacting her school experiences.

Coming out in Boyton

Jamie described that she has come out to many people in her life, including some of her peers, but she began her story with descriptions of coming out to her mom (and eventually) her dad. She explained that this was a long, stressful, and emotional process.

Coming out to family. Like many LGBTQ individuals her age, Jamie is selective with her disclosure; however, her family seemed foremost in her mind. She described how coming out to her mom was important to her, but many of her family members, including her dad, were significantly more difficult. Jamie spent a considerable amount of time discussing her worries in coming out to her parents. As argued by Savin-Williams (2001), **"**[some youth] conceal their true identity until they feel safer; others, perhaps

anticipating negative outcomes were they to be honest, sever emotional investment in the family to diminish the significance of possible rejection" (p. 25). Jamie described,

> I've come out to my mom, and it took me a really long time. It was like I kept planning to tell her and then [I] would get too scared, but I did it. [So, I told her] when I asked my date to homecoming and we were both crying, but she was really nice about it and she wasn't mad or anything. She has been really supportive.

> After describing the support her mother provides, Jamie added that she believes her mom may wish things were different. Jamie attributes this to her mom's future hopes for her. Jamie suggested, "[My mom] always tells me how she has a dream of me getting married and having kids and stuff like that, and I guess she thinks that won't happen if I'm [gay]." In this instance, it seems that Jamie's mom cannot reconcile her heteronormative vision of what a family looks like, with the family her daughter may envision for herself.

> At the time of Jamie's interview, she was not out to her dad, and remaining hidden to him was causing her anxiety. When asked about her relationship with her dad, she responded, "*Not*. I live with him half time, and I see him, but we don't talk. I talk to his girlfriend more than I talk to him." Savin-Williams' (2001) work coincides with Jamie's decision as their participants suggested that when coming out to their fathers, "nearly one half [of participants] responded overwhelmingly with a response… 'We're not very close, and he's very indifferent toward these kinds of things'" (p. 112). Jamie continued, however, with reasons she felt she must come out to her dad. Jamie went on,

I have to come out to my dad [because] it would be bad for [my mom] to know

and not my dad. I just think he would be upset. I don't know if I would call him

homophobic, but he's not really nice about that stuff all the time.

Jamie also said that part of the reason she wants to be honest with her dad is that she is

afraid he will find out from someone else. She described,

Well, in my experience, [one of my friend's families] heard about me [being gay]

and [this girl] wouldn't talk to me for the longest time. And [then] she told her

whole family and they talked to distant family that lived in other states and they

were all praying for me apparently. And I was really scared that they were going

to tell my dad, but the scary part is that what if my dad finds out from someone

else?

Jamie's descriptions of anxiety over her dad finding out from someone else are also

similar to respondents in the work of Savin-Williams (2001) in which, "Nearly three-

quarters of young women out to their father in the present study report that they cannot

specify a precise reason for disclosing to their father, other than…someone else [might]"

(p. 116).

Coming out to peers. When describing her outness to peers, Jamie suggested that

she is only out to those closest to her. Like her family, there is significant anxiety in

coming out to peers; therefore, she is selective in these decisions. Grafsky (2018)

described that selective coming out is a way that LGBT youth "protect themselves from

disclosure-related violence, verbal harassment, or other negative consequences that have

been documented following disclosure" (p. 784). Mostly, Jamie's relationships with her

peers are contingent on closeness. However, in the end, Jamie was explicit that being gay is not something she wants as her defining characteristic. Jamie described,

> Well I guess I have kinda come out. But I'm also not [really] *out*. I've only come
> out to my really close friends. Like the people that come to GSA [those] are the
> only people who really know. And I feel like I need to limit myself to how I
> speak, how I look, how I act around people. It's really draining to have to always
> be hiding and having a plan. [What] if this person finds out? What am I going to
> say? Did this person find out? Or with rumors going around, it's just like I feel
> I'm always thinking about what if they are going to figure it out? [What is] going
> to give it away?

Being gay does not define me. In all, Jamie has selectively come out to many of her parents and friends and has found some acceptance. Like Daisy (2020), a member of the National Citizen Service, Jamie suggested that she does not want her sexuality to define her. Daisy suggests,

> I've known since the age of 12 that I wasn't straight, but constantly trying to
> cram myself under a label brought me a lot of confusion rather than happiness.
> Once I turned 18, I decided to give up labelling myself; the fact that I am
> queer will always be a part of me, but I prefer to define myself as just me. (p.
> 1)

Jamie concluded,

> [being gay is] a part of your person…part of who you are. And you shouldn't
> have to hide it, but I feel like it's not the key part of who I am. Like it's important

to tell people who you are and to yell it loudly and be proud, but I don't want to be defined by just that small part of who I am.

Setting

In the following segment of her narrative, Jamie described and characterized her relationships with her peers, school, and community. Her descriptions began with words such as "close-knit," but in most situations, the closeness was not universal. Fundamentally, Jamie believes that the close-knit construction of Boyton is for a specific type of individual. Gray, Johnson, and Gilley (2016) argue, "Today more than ever, space matters where the politics of gender and sexuality in the United States are concerned, not because it is so powerfully determinative, but because its effects are so wildly unpredictable" (p. 7). Being a part of this "close-knit" community is not consistent. It instead comes with certain expectations and qualifications.

Relationships

Repeatedly, Jamie indicated that Boyton allows for close-knit relationships, as the majority of students have been together since pre-school and "[everyone has] known each other since they were little." As Jamie described, however, being a member of the LGBTQ community typically limits her accessibility to these close-knit relationships.

Relationships with peers. Jamie explained,

It feels great to have friends and peers [that] you get along with and talk to, but with some other peers, you can't talk to them, you can't really be around them, because you [don't know] what they are going to say, or how they are going to act. Sometimes I don't feel like I belong [because I'm] different. And when you hear other people [being homophobic] you can't help but take it personally. I

mean I have heard them make jokes about everything, and [even though] Boyton

has a decent amount of LGBT kids, [they are often] a special target. It happens a

lot. [For example], I'll hear [homophobic comments] in random conversations.

But yea, there are a lot of homophobic kids at this school. There was a girl who

stopped talking to me when she found out [I am gay] and didn't want me invited

to places or she wouldn't go. She didn't want to be around me anymore. We were

really close and then all of a sudden, she didn't talk to me.

Relationships to school. Like her experiences with her peers, Jamie describes

how Boyton's make-up dictates her relationships in school. Jamie summarized,

I'm not one of them, which is stupid. Because we are all the exact same person,

because we all live in the same town. So, we are all similar. But they treat me like

I'm not. That's just how it is. If you don't look a certain way, and have a certain

set of beliefs, and are in a certain friend group, then you are ignored, bullied, or

walked over.

Relationships in the community. Jamie also used the words close-knit in her

descriptions of the Boyton community, as people have typically lived here their entire

life. Baker (2016) suggested that rural spaces are often protective and accepting of their

own and being local contributes to the wellbeing of LGBT individuals. When one is born

and raised in a rural community, family and kinship seem to take precedence over how

one identifies.

Close-knit. Jamie described,

I really like the town. Mostly our closeness and how easy it is to talk to

everybody. [Like] the one thing nice about small towns are the connections at

town celebrations, and different things where the community feels close together. I like how it's kind of a friendly neighborhood and it feels like if kids are outside you can go talk to them. [I enjoy] the belongingness of it.

Close-minded. In addition to her descriptions of close-knit, Jamie also provided several ways in which Boyton is close-minded. She connected this phenomenon to the homogenous religious makeup of Boyton, which she believes contributes to how people interact (and are accepted) in this space. As Ayers (2005) suggested, "All social life is 'contingent,' implicated and unpredictable because all parts of life depend on one another. What we think of as public and private, economic, and political, religious, and secular, and military and civilian are deeply connected" (p. 135). Close-knit, when intersected with other social factors, can quickly become close-minded. Jamie then went onto describe how this "super Christian community" significantly contributes to its close-minded nature.

[And] if you're not the same as everyone at church then you are not going to fit in, this has almost ruined religion [for me]. People were convincing me that [because I am gay] my family is going to hell. So, I tried to bring my family to church all the time because I was scared, they were going to hell. [But] if heaven is gonna be full of a bunch of those people, I don't want to be there anyways.

Spatial construction. Jamie expressed,

In a small town, like there are pros and cons to closeness, as a lot of people can be close-minded. So, it's really hard for people to have a different mindset than what [they have always had] because that is the only thing they are taught. I think that parents are your biggest teachers. So, [kids often believe] what their parents think

is true and they can't be convinced otherwise. [Because of this transmission], there is only a certain type of person you can be [in Boyton] and if you are not that, you either get ignored or bullied.

Problems

The school's spatial construction, including the curriculum, pedagogy, and extracurricular activities, often dictate safety and acceptance for LGBTQ individuals. More specifically, schools are often heteronormatively constructed, which proves detrimental for everyone. As suggested by Bartone (2019),

> It is critical for teachers to recognize how heteronormativity functions in their classrooms. Particularly, teachers should be aware that not all students identify as heterosexual, and many identify or will identify in ways not conforming to the standards of heteronormativity. Thus, teachers need to engage in a pedagogy wherein students are not "othered" and heteronormativity is not perpetuated. (p. 97)

In the following segment, Jamie characterized several problems she encounters due to the heteronormativity present in her school space. Problems that Jamie described in this segment are not exclusive to Boyton but are often societal; nonetheless, these structures negatively impact Jamie's (and other LGBTQ individuals') school existence and experiences.

Curriculum and Classrooms

When asked if she ever saw LGBTQ representation in her school or the curriculum, Jamie suggested that, for the most part, she does not. She further indicated

that since she has been in high school, the small amount of inclusive curriculum she has encountered often comes with resistance from her peers. Jamie explained,

I didn't experience LGBT stuff [being] talked about until this year in history. [And] Ms. Johnson said something like we're going to be talking about civil rights. We are going to be talking about women and gay people and getting rights for them. And everyone was like are you kidding me? Like why do we need to learn about gay people? And it was just kind of negative. Everyone has such a negative mindset about it. [However,] it felt *so* good to finally have stuff in the curriculum and be talked about finally, because that has never happened in previous years here. [And] it's really important to learn about it [or] at least see representation in history because we've [LGBTQ individuals] existed for *forever* and it's just good to finally have the history and show it to everybody else.

Gym. Until recently, Boyton High School did not provide gender-neutral or private changing spaces for its LGBTQ students. Because of this, participants in this work referenced the gym (and locker rooms) as a particularly problematic space. In a rural survey conducted by GLSEN (2012), participants indicated similar experiences.

When asked about specific places in school they avoided because they felt unsafe, rural students were more likely to report having avoided bathrooms and locker rooms because of feeling more unsafe or uncomfortable than other spaces, such as the cafeteria, school busses and hallways. (p. 8)

Jamie explained,

I think that there are some classes [gym], that are kind of hard, and I know it's hard for people, especially people who [are] trans or something. And that is

because I don't know how supportive teachers are? But that could be something that is really hard to go through.

Teachers

Individuals who make up the school space can often contribute to positive school experiences for LGBTQ individuals. Included among those factors, are experiences with teachers. Rural research conducted by GLSEN (2012) reported,

> Having supportive teachers…has been shown to be positively related to academic experiences of students in general. Because LGBT students, particularly in rural areas, may feel unsafe and experience victimization in school, being able to solicit help from a supportive adult may be crucial to creating safer learning environments. (p. 25)

In many ways, Jamie suggested that her teachers are supportive, but she stipulated that support is not consistent.

Teacher response. Jamie suggested that the school has played an essential role in her life. She suggested that school "has been kind of an escape from everything. I used to really like going to school. I would wake up early, and I was super excited. She continued,

> [The] teachers are very, very, great. I think they love what they teach. You can tell. I don't know how to describe them. It gives [me] a warm feeling to know that I have classes with certain teachers because you know that it's gonna be an enjoyable class.

Unfortunately, Jamie suggested that not all classroom spaces and teachers are equal, and when classrooms were unsafe and exclusionary, her entire experience

changed. GLSEN (2012) suggested, "If the use of biased language goes unchallenged in the school setting, then it can signal that such language is acceptable for use in the school and perhaps in other public spaces." (p. 7). Jamie described this in the following segment.

It was like a month or two after school started [and] there was a new group of Black kids who moved here, and they all rode my bus. And [some] kids in one of my classes said something along the lines of 'go back to the cotton fields' [and] they used the 'N' word…and then my teacher [was] not shutting it down and was listening to it. And [responded with] whatever, 'boys will be boys.' And [he] only ever shuts things down when it's to *his* benefit…but if people are saying things that aren't right, he is just like, it's ok.

As supportive teachers may improve school experiences for LGBTQ individuals, unsupportive staff achieve the opposite. GLSEN (2012) explained, "in general, students who feel more connected to their school perform better academically. Unfortunately, LGBTQ students who are more victimized in school report lower school belonging" (p. 17). Jamie described her feelings on this matter.

I wish adults knew what it felt like to feel like everyone is fighting against you. When [school is] the only place that you could come to feel like part of the community. Because if you don't like [your home], when you come to school it is somewhere you can get a new family and feel like part of something. But when you come here and people are rude, or teachers don't seem to understand what you are going through, it almost feels like you don't belong.

Events and Un(helpful) Spaces

Gender and Sexuality Alliance

In descriptions of her lived experiences, Jamie suggested that she spends much of her day navigating peers, teachers, curriculum, and policies. When asked about supportive spaces, Jamie said "Well, GSA is one obviously." Citing Mayo (2013),

> The presence of a GSA does not solve the problems faced by LGBTQ-identified youth and their allies, but it is one part of a larger solution because it positively affects the school experiences of many youth regardless of whether they actually attend meetings. (p. 357)

Jamie explained,

> When we first took a tour [of the high school] and the GSA posters were up, that [felt] pretty good. I was like, finally. [In the middle school] we had stickers [with] everyone's equal here, or all are welcome…but it was never really a big thing, but here it feels [like a much] bigger part. [And], the GSA, they are very open to stuff and I'm able to talk to people.

Jamie described that although GSA is helpful, some of the harassment she has experienced stems directly from GSA on social media. In several instances, students recorded themselves tearing down the GSA signs, and in a recent Snapchat post (which she shared with me), there was a picture of the pride flag with the words "fricking disgusting" as the caption.

Extra-curriculars

Jamie suggested that extra-curricular activities were also helpful to her as they provide acceptance, especially if you were unable to find that in other school spaces or at home. She explained, "I was in the middle school plays, and I enjoy the theater a lot. I guess anything really having to do with the arts I enjoy a lot." She described how these

types of activities often alleviate her level of stress. Schmitz and Tyler (2018) argue that "LGBQ youth do face adversity and challenges, but they are also "[drawing] from beneficial sources of social support, possess feelings of social connectedness, and demonstrate a positive outlook on life" (p. 3). Citing Jamie,

> [Stress] kind of carries through [my day]. You know the stress of being at school. Kind of leads to stress of being at home. And that's just the cycle. Oh no, I have to go to school. Oh no, I have to be at home. That is why extracurriculars are so important to me. I really enjoy doing [them], and it is something to look forward to all the time, every day.

Resolution

When asked about her future in Boyton, Jamie indicated she intends to leave. She explained, "Well, I really don't want to live here. It's a part of where I grew up, but I don't really see myself living here ever again." She then went on to describe her plans for the future.

> Me and my friends already made a plan that we all want to move to Seattle together. Because we really don't like Boyton. And we think if we stayed in Boyton our whole lives it would be a waste, because its's so small and everyone has the same mindset. If we don't go to other towns or countries or states, we're missing out on what other people are like. I want to find a community where [I] can be accepted and be myself.

Chapter Five: Charlie

Character

I based Charlie's character on interview data from three white participants who range in age from 16-18. All three identify as female, two identify as lesbian, and one indicated she was unsure of her sexual orientation. Like Jamie's narrative, I eliminated the vocalized pauses from Charlie's spoken words (Seidman, 2013).

Charlie and I had her interview session in a private classroom at Boyton High School, and even though we were alone in the interview room, there were many "typical" school noises happening all around us. For example, lockers opening and closing, students and teachers talking and laughing, and announcements sounding over the intercom. Among the activity, Charlie began her interview by describing how she came to live in Boyton, and her experiences coming out to family and peers.

Living in Boyton

In describing her life in Boyton, Charlie focused on her education and teachers. Charlie's words seem rather promising because dissimilar to the GLSEN (2017) National School Climate Survey, where only 38% of participants indicated they found support from their teachers, Charlie described the opposite. In discussing her residency and education, Charlie said,

> I've lived here my whole life. I was born here. My parents moved here for my
> older brother. I haven't gone to any other school. There has never been talk of me
> going to any other school. So, I have just been—here. [School has] been the
> center point of my whole life, and I really appreciate how much attention they pay
> to education. I learned a lot at this school. Teachers are instilling discipline and

[they are] not going to spoon feed you. You need to do some things for yourself.

Everything that I have learned has been through school. [I'm] not saying that my

mom didn't teach me anything because she definitely did, [but my] love for

schoolwork and education, I definitely got that from here.

Positive descriptions of school and teachers provide the perception that Charlie

likes and values school. One possible reason for her positivity in this segment might be

my position as a teacher in Boyton. Collins, Shattell, and Thomas (2005) suggest, "An

informant may even make an effort to speak the interviewer's 'language'…rather than his

or her own" (p. 190). Concluding segments in her narrative suggest school and teachers

are not necessarily as supportive as she described here.

Coming out in Boyton

Charlie is out to many people in her life, including some of her family and

friends. She described this process happening when she was in middle school, and for the

most part, she has experienced support and acceptance. She also described various

degrees of conditionality or *selective coming out*, within this acceptance. Grafsky (2018)

referred to selective coming out in her work with 22 nonheterosexual youth in the

Midwest between the ages of 14-21. She suggested that LGBT individuals analyze verbal

and non-verbal messages they receive from family members and then decide the costs

and rewards of coming out.

Selective coming out is a way that LGBT youth "protect themselves from

disclosure-related violence, verbal harassment, or other negative consequences that have

been documented following disclosure" (p. 784). In addition to selective coming out, it

also seems that silence or avoidance of the topic was also a factor after she came out. In

the end, however, Charlie clarified that acceptance as a person with a multifaceted personality was more important to her identity than being gay.

Coming out to family. LGBTQ youth often struggle with their decision to come out to their parents; however, youth who have parental support often find greater success and security. Grafsky (2018) argued that being able to come out to their families often allowed sexual minority youth to be closer to their families and live authentic lives. For Charlie, her parents and grandparents were supportive when she came out. She described,

I came out to my mom in sixth grade, and I believe in eighth grade I came out to my dad. My mom, she has always been supportive. When I came out to her, I came out as bisexual and she said; I think you are just a lesbian. I grew up with [my dad] saying mildly homophobic things and that made me very scared to come out to [him]. But I later asked [my dad] about why he said that stuff, because as soon as I came out, he didn't say anything bad about it anymore. He was very supportive, but I asked him about it, and he said, "I was just trying to be cool." [My brother] is cool, I remember I came out to Kirk while playing the game of Life. Because as a joke he [asked], do you want a husband or a wife—when I got to the stop and get married [space]. And I was like, can I have a wife please? And I gave him that look, and he said sure, and [I] said ok, thanks. When I came out to my mom, she told me to tell my grandma. My grandma thought it was a little weird or strange, but she wasn't like particularly against it. I got so lucky—that I didn't have angry parents.

Charlie also noted that she presumes her family is accepting, but often she feels they avoid the topic. She attributed this to the importance of family and "typical"

expectations in a rural setting. Cohn and Hastings (2010) argued, "[rural areas have] a strong emphasis on bloodlines, the creation of family—presumably heterosexual family" (p. 71).

> But even my mom, I don't think she's fully acknowledged that it's a thing. [I think that is because] she wants to be a grandma. I think that actually kind of goes into like the rural, because your family is very important when you are in a smaller community and I feel like you don't say anything that could jeopardize your family. [My] sister is—very religious, and I love that about her. I love that she has an organization that she feels like she really belongs to, but I think there is a battle between her religion and me. She can't decide whether it goes against her religion that I'm openly gay.

Overall, Charlie described relationships with her family similar to Alonzo and Buttitta (2019), who use the relational categories of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal. As such, Charlie's vertical relationships with parents and grandparents (vertical) and horizontal relationships with siblings are supportive, but she is unsure of her diagonal relationship with extended family. She described,

> I don't know if [my mom] told the larger family, but after I came out to my mom there was kind of an air around it. Nobody said anything it's kind of taboo to talk about it. I don't think they care; they just don't know how to talk about it, or they think they shouldn't.

Coming out to peers. Charlie is out to her friends, and some of her peers at Boyton; however, she perceives a certain degree of remaining hidden is required. Participants in a rural survey indicated that "only 28% of rural students reported that

other students in their schools were accepting, indicating that peers in rural areas were significantly less accepting than in suburban (33%) or urban (46% accepting) areas" (GLSEN, 2012, p. 26). Updated information in a national school climate survey also suggested non-acceptance from peers. Participants in this survey indicated that "87.3% experienced harassment or assault based on personal characteristics including sexual orientation, gender expression [and], gender" (GLSEN, 2017, p. 5). Charlie remembered,

> The first person that I came out to, was my friend, who came out to me. And [I am out to] most of my friends. I remember [when I first came] out publicly was during history day my freshman year. I did the Stonewall riots. I thought that's cool. That's my history. I remember I had to walk on eggshells whenever I told anybody about it. I remember I was terrified because we [had to have] three book sources and I [thought] I can't go to the library and get a book, because if someone sees that they are gonna—say things. [So] there are certain times when I will hide parts of myself. And it just makes me really panicky, I mean because it is like I'm living two different lives.

College peers. Charlie has moved partially to a post-secondary college program this year and described that she has "chosen to *not* be openly gay while on campus." Although she feels this is the right decision for various reasons, her mom is worried that this decision may be detrimental. As argued in a study at the University of Arizona, "we've found being out is good for you. This is clearly aligned with everything we know about identity. Being able to be who you are is crucial to mental health" (*USA Today*, 2015, p. 1).

Also, Corrigan and Matthews (2003) suggest that many LGBTQ individuals choose to hide their identity. However, coming out may benefit the entire gay, and lesbian community as this often results in a "stigmatized group to obtain greater social power" (p. 240). Being out, however, often poses difficult challenges for LGBTQ youth, and "while heterosexual peers are learning how to date, gay and lesbian youth are learning how to hide, [which] often results in enormous psychological, social and emotional isolation" (McLean, 2001, p. 113). Charlie explained, however, that she is confident in her decision.

> This year I've only come out to one person, because I'm going to Midwestern State. I have chosen not to [be out] because I wanted to focus on school because it is *harder* when you are taking college classes. But I also wanted to make friends because I feel like at Boyton as soon as you come out you give off the stereotype of being in the LGBT community. You know there is a bubble around you and it's very hard to make friends. I didn't want to have to worry about that. I didn't want to have to worry about people not liking me for something that I couldn't control. I wanted them to like me for my opinions. [I have] made more friends this year than I have in a long time, and they're all different types of people. I mostly don't regret doing it, it's just hard because even my mom said, 'I just want to make sure that you are not trying to be a different person.' So, every once in a while, I kind of feel like [I might be]. But I don't have to be a stereotype to be a lesbian. It's not anybody's *business* unless I like them or if we are dating or whatever. It's not something that should be life-altering it should be just *something*—in general.

Being gay does not define me. In all, Charlie has experienced being out in her home and school. For the most part, she has found acceptance. However, she suggested that "a lot of people in the LGBT community make it a personality trait," and she would rather not do that. In Boyton, she found that her defining characteristic was being gay, and she would rather her family and friends focus on "*everything* that makes me—me rather than the *one* thing." She continued "I feel like it's easier to be closer to people when they don't think you're different so, I've been lucky enough to kind of get a fresh start."

Setting

In the following segment of her narrative, Charlie described and characterized her relationships with her peers, school, and the community. In her descriptions, she indicated positive experiences, but there was an addendum to her descriptions in most situations. In most ways, the efforts made by her school, family, and community seem ingenuine and inconsistent.

Relationships

Repeatedly, Charlie indicated that Boyton allows for close-knit relationships, as students have been together since pre-school. Even so, Charlie described that being a member of the LGBTQ community typically limits the availability of these close-knit relationships. Her words echo those of participants of a national school climate survey that indicated that 49% of participants did not feel supported or included by their peers (GLSEN, 2017).

Relationships with peers. Citing Charlie,

It's just—the hardest thing when your peers look at you different. It's a feeling

like you don't belong even if you have lived in Boyton your *entire* life. Feeling

like you're the outsider. Just because [your peers] don't understand what you are.

So even though I've gone to school with these kids for twelve years they called us

dykes. I remember I had a moment when I looked at my friends, [and thought] if

they are going to insult us can they at least come up with something original? I get

called the dyke and the faggot and all that. I'm bored. If you are going to insult

me can you come up with something new? I'm gay. Yea!

Relationships to school. Students who participated in a national school climate

survey indicated they face many challenges navigating their school space, and only

38.8% reported school administration as supportive. In particular, rural students indicated

"higher rates of victimization, and anti-LGBTQ discriminatory school policies and

practices (GLSEN, 2017, p. 15). Charlie summarized her experiences,

I like Boyton, or at least I think I do. It is a good school. There are a *lot* of

teachers I absolutely love; I've met a lot of really nice people there. It is not like a

bad place, it's just there is a lot of things that get left unchecked. I just wish that

somebody—I don't know who, could say *knock it off*.

Charlie then added to her experiences in school by describing the hidden elements

and false portrayals of support at Boyton. Charlie continued,

[Even so], there is what they show and whats happening, [on the surface] we

don't tolerate bullying, we don't tolerate this, and then there's what [actually]

goes on and [oftentimes] you can't report this because you said something back

[to your harasser]. Or [the student action was not] serious enough for

[administration] to make any action over it. And its hypocrisy. We're better than these [other] schools because they have so much bad stuff going on, it's like *no*—[we] are just good at hiding it.

Relationships in the community. Charlie used the words close-knit in her descriptions of the Boyton community, as people have typically lived in this area their entire lives. Scholarship suggests that rural spaces can often be protective and accepting of their own, as being local contributes to the wellbeing of LGBT individuals. When one is born and raised in a rural community, family and kinship seem to take precedence over how one identifies (Baker, 2016). Charlie suggested, "I *like* that Boyton is close-knit." Most of her words, however, suggest something different.

Close-minded. In contrast to close-knit, Charlie described that in many respects, the spatial construction of Boyton often negates close-knit and instead contributes to what she described as close-minded. Yarbrough's (2004) interviews with gay adolescents suggested that because rural areas are often conservative and hold heteronormative attitudes and prejudices, participants often felt isolated and disconnected from their communities. Charlie explained,

> I *like* that Boyton is close-knit. But I also kind of hate it. Just in the sense, it's nice when things go right, but if something else is going on and a rumor spreads around [about me] then everybody knows. [And] I feel like we are not connected. It's like the Boyton community doesn't care about me. I feel like there has never been that connection. I don't mind living here it's nice, it's small, it's pleasant, but the community as a whole hasn't changed or influenced me.

Charlie continued,

[This community is] kind of stuck. Like, they have such a bad view of gay people. And it's hard to have a discussion with a community who is stuck in that. Who is so closed minded about the idea… and with me [and others] growing up seeing no other gay person—ever. [And] if you want to change the people being jackasses you have to try to get through to the parents. Because we have such a close-minded community the parents aren't learning. And therefore, the kids aren't learning.

Religion also contributed to participants experiences within the community, and the church Charlie attended contributed to the close-mindedness she described. As Avery (2002) explained, religious leanings place this community within a right-wing level of tolerance, which is often known to be intolerant and homophobic. Because family and community dispositions often shape the attitudes and behaviors of young people, Boyton individuals are cultured to believe that homosexuality is "aberrant, if not immoral, behavior" (p. 192). Charlie spoke of a specific church in Boyton,

[I had] a really bad experience. My sister and I were forced to go to church until we were 16. And I hated it. I mean I hated every second of it. I was with students from [Boyton] in my confirmation class, and they were awful. So, [I would get bullied in school] and then go home and go to church, and the same thing happened. I used to go to a Lutheran church and the pastor there is very stark, [and if you didn't] follow [his rules], you were damned to hell. It's Missouri Synod so it's really strict. [I feel he] is a wolf in sheep's clothing. I mean he is outwardly—really nice, [but] the pastor essentially said all of [my years of

anxiety, bullying, and self-harm] would not have happened if [I] were just a better Christian.

Problems

In the following segment, Charlie characterized several problems she and other LGBTQ individuals face within their school, including curriculum, teachers, policies, and extra-curriculars. Problems that Charlie described are "not exclusive to a particular educative context, but rather, are global in nature and manifests in myriad forms both tacit and overt to discipline bodies into forms acceptable to the straight, cisgender, male gaze" (Martin & Strom, 2019, p. 2). Enactments of these phenomena include, "the failure of teachers, administrators, and other school personnel to respond appropriately, or in some cases at all, to bullying, harassment, and violence on the basis of diverse gender and sexual identities" (p. 2).

Curriculum and Classrooms.

When asked to reflect if she ever saw LGBTQ representation in her school or curriculum, Charlie suggested that, for the most part, she does not. She suggested that many of her English teachers are inclusive, but their efforts can often be double-edged for two reasons. First, anytime teachers mention "gay" curriculum, students often look directly at those who are out as gay or perceived as gay. Second, when teachers provide an inclusive curriculum, they are often accused of promoting their "liberal agenda." Charlie expressed,

> I don't see representation. There are a couple of teachers that really, really push for visibility. [For example], this person was LGBTQ, or they went through this because they were homosexual during a time where homosexuality was illegal or

frowned upon. Some teachers especially the English department really push for

visibility and representation, and it's wonderful seeing them try. [But] if we have

a unit, [and] somebody mentions a gay person in history or literature, people look

at me and then whisper. [And oftentimes] most of the students in the class, [when

they hear] LGBT immediately [assume] the teacher is a liberal and trying to push

their liberal agenda. And other teachers, I feel like they just don't mention it,

because they don't want to start that argument with the classroom. Or students

will shout one word and then people will laugh, but you can't completely realize

what that word was until you [realize] they said faggot. And those things happen

too quick for a teacher to do anything about, so then it just sits there, and you are

like—oh, cool. But also, it really sucks because there is nothing [no teacher

response].

Gym. When asked about difficult places in school, Charlie referred to a curricular

area similar to participants in a rural GLSEN (2012) report who classified gym

(specifically locker rooms) as the most difficult. Charlie described,

The first [place] that pops in my head is gym. Because—I remember when I

came out to one of my friends in middle school, she asked if, I looked at girls in

the locker room and I was like *no*, why would I do that? And there is the

stereotype of the predatory lesbian where all lesbians just want to turn [other]

girls gay—**no**. It's not a thing. I just hated gym.

Teachers

Participants in a national climate survey indicated that 98.5% of LGBTQ students

heard the word 'gay' used negatively, 95.3% heard sexual orientation slurs, 94% heard

negative remarks about gender expression, and 87.4% heard negative remarks about transgender individuals (GLSEN, 2017). Although many of these slurs happened in the presence of school staff, nearly half of the students reported that no intervention occurred. Arguably, the most alarming survey result indicated that 56.6% of students reported that their *teachers* were the source of gay slurs, and derogatory comments (GLSEN, 2017).

Teacher response. When asked about her school experiences and spaces in school, Charlie discussed that school officials and teachers often neglect and do not respond to homophobic bullying. She also discussed that in some cases, teachers were the source of bullying. Charlie did reference several supportive teachers, but even so, when the space of that teacher's classroom changed (the mix of students), a formerly safe space transformed.

For example, Charlie suggested that some of her teachers provide inclusive and safe classrooms, but safety was often dependent on the mixture of students. If certain persons enrolled in her classes, a formerly safe space often became exclusive and uncomfortable. Beebe et al., (2012) suggested, "social practice activates spatial meanings, they are not fixed in space, but are invoked by actors, men, and women, who bring their own discursive knowledge and strategic intentions to the interpretation of spatial meanings" (p. 530). Charlie detailed her experiences,

> I feel like a few teachers understand. [But] there is a lot more going on than [they] think. Kids aren't genuinely nice to each other, and they won't be nice without having a reason. [And] it's a problem with students who are gay and get made fun of. [The teachers] *understand* it's a problem, and they acknowledge it, but some

have no idea. [And] I feel a lot of the higher faculty don't acknowledge it. I don't know *how* they could, but that's [not] my job [to figure] out. Because it is one thing to say, there should be more *help* for those students. But I think they don't know *how*, because…there's so much [fear] with adults saying the wrong thing and offending a student. But I feel like at a certain point, if a kid gets called a faggot every day, you saying the wrong terminology isn't going to hurt them as badly. But they [seem] to walk on eggshells because they don't want to get in trouble if they screw up. But at the same time…you need to do *something*. But you know, there isn't much to do. Cuz you can complain about it, but nothing gets done. You get the letter. The *letter.*

The letter. In the above segment, Charlie referred to an apology letter written to the GSA (meant as punishment) by an individual who had torn down a GSA sign. Charlie described the consequences for this action as a "fill in the blank," or "kindergarten equivalent" of an actual apology. In her experiences, consequences for harmful actions, basically go unchecked in Boyton.

Ineffective school policies were indicated in a school climate survey where 55.3% of LGBTQ students did not report incidents to school staff because they doubted an intervention would occur, and 60.4% said that staff did nothing or told students to ignore it. Relatedly, recommendations in that same survey indicated that comprehensive school policies that specifically name sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, and include methods of reporting violations improve LGBTQ individuals school experience (GLSEN, 2017). Boyton's student handbook (2019) includes language

intended to protect LGBTQ individuals; however, based on Charlie's lived experiences, words on paper do not equate with action.

Teacher slurs. LGBTQ students often report hearing hurtful words and phrases directed at them during the school day. Specifically, 98.5% negatively heard gay, and 91.8% said these words caused them great distress. When provided with supportive staff, however, LGBTQ individuals were less likely to feel unsafe (43.4% vs. 79.2%), and less likely to miss school (20.0% vs. 48.8%) (GLSEN, 2017). Charlie described many ways that teachers had the potential to address homophobic and transphobic bullying, but instead, they ignored it and kept teaching. Also, she indicated that her teachers were both subtly and outwardly contributors to the bullying she witnessed and experienced. Charlie described,

> There are teachers that overhear remarks like "that's so gay," or very homophobic things and they don't say anything or even look like they are bothered. I feel like there are a lot of times where teachers don't see whats going on, but I feel like there are a lot of times when teachers do, and they just choose to ignore it.

Teachers as bullies. In addition to their teachers not responding to hurtful words, 56% of LGBTQ individuals reported that they heard homophobic remarks from teachers, and 71.0% heard remarks from other staff (GLSEN, 2017). Charlie went on to describe incidents of teachers outwardly bullying students.

> [I had a teacher who was] transphobic to a student who was going through a name change and her response was "call me when its legal." The student said, [please] call me this instead of that and then the teacher said, "why all the name changes?" And the next day apologized— [the teacher said] "I don't know what I was

thinking." [I think, however,] You're an adult…you have a conscious train of thought you can hold your tongue. There are a lot of teachers though that legally can't do anything against it [being gay], but you can tell that they are very against it. [And] there was one time I asked one of my teachers [that I really liked], [to buy] LGBT shirts or GSA shirts and before I said that it was LGBT she was totally signed up, and I said oh, it's for GSA and then she said "no I don't think I will." I was like, oh ok. And I walked away and ever since I did that, she never looked at me the same.

School policies. LGBTQ individuals at Boyton have successfully formed a GSA, which often serves as a space of acceptance and support. In an effort to create safe spaces beyond the GSA, many teachers display the Boyton logo with a rainbow and the words "*Everyone Welcome.*" Charlie referenced these signs but also indicated she feels they are insincere and insufficient.

In terms of the rainbow, people know it's an LGBT thing and kids recognize that, and they don't like it. You know, I can't speak for those kids, but I have seen kids point and sneer and think it's funny. I just think it's not a big thing, it's a sign. And that sounds so rude, but nobody is going to look at it and have an epiphany of—oh, maybe I should stop being a jackass. [And] there is no teacher that is sitting a student down and saying you shouldn't be a jackass. There is nobody doing that. We do have those things that we put on the doors now. Like the [Boyton logo] with the rainbow on it, but I don't know. It's kind of like when you put the "I donated" thing on your car bumper. You did that, and thanks, but what else did you do? Thank you for showing that you're open to it, but what have you

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said and done to be open to it? I've never seen a teacher come to our GSA. [And] the GSA [announcement] is on the [announcement] screens now. And oh, we have posters and all of that. But those [get] torn down. That happened my freshman year. And instead of punishing the student—instead of taking him out of sports, they basically gave him the kindergarten equivalent of "fill in the blanks" of your apology and then write it into an actual letter and then he just had to give it to the leader of the GSA. And the leader of the GSA read it out to us. So, he didn't *have* to do anything.

Mainly, her words indicated that LGBTQ individuals need more beyond "LGBTQ day celebrations, gay-straight alliances (GSAs), and feel good posters, slogans, or t-shirts that proclaim allyship" (Martin & Strom, 2019, p. 3).

Spatial Considerations

Spatial construction is an essential consideration in this dissertation, as not all schools or rural spaces are constructed the same. Charlie specifically discussed how her classroom (and people present) often dictated its level of safety and acceptance. In all, the identities, actions, reactions, and cultural practices are dependent on and invoked by the unique persons within each space (Beebe et al., 2012). Essentially, space is not monolithic; it is highly complicated, and the way that humans act and react, as well as find help and resources, "literally depends in many cases on where [and who] they stand [with]" (Grey et al., 2016, p. 7). Charlie described,

I don't really think it has anything to do with rooms or activities. Actually, it has nothing to do with the physical space or activity, it's just the environment [including] the people there and the expectations that they bring. Classrooms

[vary] at times with certain students. Yea, I think it has less to do with the space and more the people in it—at the time. So, I could be in any classroom. I could be in your classroom, and if there are certain people in there, I wouldn't feel comfortable sharing. I think it's less of where the space is and it's more of who's in there. I don't know, with people that aren't willing to be kind [and] think about how they might affect others. [But] I mean they generally don't care. They are just saying it because they want to. It's like instant gratification like, I want to say what I think, I want to see your reaction, I don't care how it's gonna affect anyone. Again, it has nothing to do with the physical space. It has more to do with the environment that has been created there.

Events and Un(helpful) Spaces

When asked about supportive spaces, Charlie indicated a few, including specific classrooms and extra-curriculars. Based on Charlie's lived experiences, each space's uniqueness contributed to the inequities in her social experiences (Schmidt, 2015). Charlie explained, "English department. English is really good. I really like working with [those teachers]. I love being in [this teacher's] room because she doesn't let kids be douche bags. I [trust] the English department." She then went on to discuss extracurriculars.

I am going to get really stereotypical here. More of the—arts probably. So, I was in soccer and it wasn't a very friendly environment. I felt like I had expectations to live up to, and I needed to be like one of the "soccer girls." I have been doing theater for six years, and I can just be myself. I'm comfortable there.

Charlie recognized that LGBTQ individuals had claimed GSA and certain classes as safe spaces; however, each space still posed challenges.

> I used to go to the GSA at our school. But I stopped going. I stopped going because there was a lot of drama in it. And then, one of my friends said it is basically free therapy. And I said, that's nice but I don't want to go to that. I joined it because I wanted to expand my knowledge of what it's like to be gay in places [that are not Boyton]…Because you don't talk about that in public school...So then I felt, we had a place to go and to meet and we did have a leader who was passionate about it, But we were freshman we [needed more help doing things].

Resolution

For various reasons, Charlie was adamant that after graduation, she intends to leave Boyton. Her words are similar to participants in Yarbrough's (2004) interviews with gay adolescents. This work suggested that because rural areas are often conservative and hold heteronormative attitudes and prejudices, participants often felt isolated and disconnected from their communities. One participant described his rural life as "…like [a] raft on the ocean, but there's no one to throw you a line…no one to talk to…really alone…big time isolation" (pp. 137-138). Charlie explained,

> *I gotta get out of here*. I gotta go. I don't want my kids to have to deal with that. It doesn't matter really [if] you're *gay* or not. I mean *any* sign of being different is really easy to get you destroyed. In Boyton, it's a very close community so if you are slightly different then you are exiled. I want to live somewhere more relaxed because in Boyton if you are gay, or Black or fricking just different, its

automatically an issue. If your family doesn't make a certain amount of money

you are different and, *why* would I want to be around that? Yea, I can't see myself

staying. I'm so excited to get away.

Chapter Six: Justice

I based the character of Justice on interview data from three white participants who range in age from 14-17. One individual identifies as transmale, and two identify as gender fluid. One individual identifies as pansexual, and two said they "like girls," but it is complicated. Similar to Jamie and Charlie's narratives, I eliminated the vocalized pauses from Justice's spoken words (Seidman, 2013).

Justice and I had his interview session in a private classroom at Boyton High School, and even though we were alone in the interview room, there were many typical "school" noises happening all around us. During the interview, we could hear students and teachers laughing and saying goodbye for the day, backpacks being loaded and zipped, and janitor vacuums preparing classrooms for the next day. Amongst the activity, Justice began his interview by describing how he came to live in Boyton, and how his experiences in this small town and school have impacted him, including his experiences coming out to family and peers.

Character

Living in Boyton

Students attending Boyton have access to a wide range of courses, both required and elective, including several concurrent enrollment courses where they may simultaneously earn high school and college credit. Government data collected from this Midwestern state indicates that graduation rates since 2018 averaged 95%, and 71% of those who graduated transitioned to postsecondary programs (Minnesota Department of Education, 2019). Students in this district also have access to a wide variety of activities that include both athletics and fine arts. Many Boyton residents, including Justice,

indicated they moved to this community because of its schools. In describing his residency, Justice suggested his family moved here because of Boyton public schools' reputation, but then went on to clarify how this reputation does not apply to all students.

> I moved here in [middle school] because I wasn't having a very good time in [my old school]. Just a lot of different stuff was going on. Out of all the houses we looked at, Boyton had the best education system. I have heard so many parents talking about how they moved here [because] all they heard was good reviews, but [these were] all families with straight, white, children.

Coming out in Boyton

When asked about coming out, Justice described this happening in stages. More specifically, he described that early in his life, he "liked girls in a romantic or crush kind of way," but as time went on, he "came to terms with being transgender." As indicated in a GLSEN (2009) report specifically conducted with transgender individuals, "Some transgender students may feel that they cannot publicly acknowledge their sexual orientations or gender identity because…those who were out in school were also more likely to report experiences of victimization" (p. 30). Justice described similar experiences in the following segments.

Coming out to family. Coming out to family members is often a difficult decision for many LGBTQ youth. As described by Savin-Williams (2001)

> Indeed, some of the most exacting decisions facing sexual-minority youths are whether they should reveal the nature of their sexuality to family members and, if so, when and in what manner. Resolving these dilemmas may very well challenge a youth's willingness to accept a newly recognized and labeled sexual identity.

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Thus, disclosure to the family may be one of the most arduous declarations of individuation yet faced by a sexual- minority youth. (p. 25)

Justice is out to parts of his family, who seem to be "trying," but based on his description's acceptance is often unstable. Justice explained,

I have come out for the most part [to] my parents [and] my aunt [and] my great uncle who is always supportive. [But] I was kind of forced out [when my mom] picked me up from school one day. I was struggling a lot and she found out that I had been doing self-harm, which was one of the things that I did. [Then] I had to tell her pretty much everything that I had been keeping from her, which was extremely difficult. It has been two years now, and she still very much struggles with it, which I understand. But sometimes I feel like we've made progress [and we are] moving forward, but then she just completely [bounces] back to where we started, and she gets sensitive and upset. My dad [is] super stubborn. So, in terms of that, we don't really talk about the way I feel because that's just *not* what we *do*. I think he would be on the same level of my mom or even more so if we did talk about it more often. But my mom, she corrects herself—sometimes and so you can tell she is trying. Like, she [will say] she— I mean he— I mean Justice. My stepmom really sticks out because when I came out to her, she basically tried to tell me that I wasn't real and that I was just imagining it, and it was a phase and I was experimenting.

Coming out to peers. Transgender students who were out to their peers reported a "greater sense of belonging to their school community than those who were not out to a few other students and staff (GLSEN, 2009, p. xxi). Justice acknowledged he "pretty

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much came out to everybody" at school. Being out was important to Justice, but similar to family, his outness comes with mixed reactions and levels of acceptance. He discussed,

[My coming out] first started actually in school. At first, I didn't want anyone to know, but [now] I want people to understand who I am, and respect who I am. My little group of [my gay friends]. I came out to them. [After that], I just became more self-aware. [But sometimes], when I walk into a classroom, people won't greet me with my chosen name. I know there are specifically some students who are just not ok with it. And yea, I just don't interact [with them].

Setting

In the following segment of his narrative, Justice described and characterized his relationships with peers, school, and the community. In each of his descriptions, he indicated some positive experiences, but in most situations, there was an addendum to his descriptions. In most ways, the efforts made by his peers, school, and the community seem ingenuine and inconsistent.

Relationships

Justice indicated some positive experiences with his peers, school, and community, but in most situations, Justice described his school life as "awful... I don't have a ton of friends. I've never been popular here. And the people that aren't friends with me—a lot of them refuse to understand that I have feelings too." In a GLSEN (2009) survey conducted specifically for transgender individuals, participants reported "transgender students experienced higher levels of victimization than other students… [and were] less likely to feel that they were a part of their school" (p. 29). In addition, "transgender students had a lower sense of school belonging than non-transgender LGB

students" (p. 29). Most of what Justice explained indicated his relationships are often tricky.

Relationships with peers. When asked to describe relationships with peers, Justice recounted an average day, including people and spaces that provide support and care. Justice described,

[I] go to school trying to have a great day. Not start panicking. Not start crying. Not to just mentally die inside. Then I go to English. The only person who sits next to me doesn't like me at all, so we don't really talk. Then [I've] got lunch where I have a couple of friends, but nobody super close. And most of my day is trying *not* to be a nervous wreck. And trying to keep at least a little bit of my sanity. And someone will say, because they know how [I] identify that "I don't believe in trans people." There have always been people who have told me I'm going to go to hell, [and suggest] you should come to church, and "we'll fix you right up. "Some [experiences] are extremely difficult.

Justice continued with additional experiences.

There is a lot less bullying than what happened in my old school. I'm not saying that bullying is eliminated here, but it's a lot less. I guess I have pretty good relationships with [my peers]. I only have a couple of close friends, but I'm definitely acquainted with a lot of different people. And there is a lot of people here who are really supportive, and I love them for that. [The people in the musical] are a lot more accepting, so I am pretty ok with my peers in the musical.

Relationships to school. Rural LGBTQ individuals compared "to their suburban and urban peers…experience more derogatory comments as well as more direct

harassment in school on the basis of their sexual orientation and/or gender expression"

(GLSEN, 2012, p. 29). In just a few words, Justice summarized his experiences in school

and offered advice to his teachers and peers. Justice explained,

> I like the high school; it is a lot more accepting than the middle school. The
> teachers are a lot more accepting *here* than in the middle school. Most of the
> teachers I've met actually ask: 'Hey, whats this?' And what is my name or my
> pronouns and my identity. [The art teacher] on the first day had a syllabus and a
> sheet that had a few questions and one of the questions was: What are your
> preferred pronouns and your preferred name? And I find that helps a lot.

Relationships in the community. Similar to Jamie and Charlie, Justice also used

the words close-knit as reasons he likes Boyton. There were, however, several reasons

why closeness proved harmful. Justice described,

> Yea, I do like stuff about the community. [I like] most of the people. It is kind of
> a small town, but it is not tiny, which I really like. A lot of people are super nice
> and stuff. [I do] like the calmness of it.

Justice continued with concerns,

> I tend to avoid playgrounds and stuff now. Unless I am with other people.
> Because there have been a lot of times where I have been called dyke or faggot,
> while I'm out at the park just trying to have a good time. So, I tend to avoid those
> places now. Especially when I'm alone and if it is right after school gets out, or
> like 2:00 on a Saturday afternoon.

Problems

In the following segment, Justice characterized several problems he and other LGBTQ individuals face within their school, including curriculum, teachers, policies, and extra-curriculars. Problems that Justice described are not exclusive to Boyton but are often societal. As Martin and Strom (2019) argue, "for gender diverse and LGBTQ individuals, systems of schooling have historically been and continue to be less inviting, frequently marginalizing, and/or erasing, and at times actively oppressing, their presence and representation" (p. 2).

Curriculum and Classrooms

Overall, when allowed to talk about LGBTQ issues in school, "only 19.8% of LGBTQ students were taught positive representations about LGBTQ people, history or events in their schools." In addition, only 6.7% of students reported receiving LGBTQ-inclusive sex education" (GLSEN, 2017, p. 8). When asked to reflect if he ever saw LGBTQ representation in his school or curriculum, Justice spoke of a lack of representation and specific areas of exclusion. Wernick et al. (2017) suggested that "Trans individuals face physical violence and harassment, disregard for their gender identity and expression, as well as curriculum and pedagogical practices that are harmful to their development" (p. 917). Justice began,

> The only LGBT representation I ever see in this school is the GSA posters
> hanging up on the walls, and that is it. Because there is not really anything in the
> curriculum about LGBT history. There is nothing in the curriculum about
> relationships and sex—*period*, much less LGBT relationships, and sex and how to
> be safe with *that*. We're taught abstinence is the only option. [So], if I were

messing around with another girl, I'm not going to get pregnant, that is not what I'm worried about. I want to learn how to be safe.

Gym. Spaces of necessity and vulnerability, such as bathrooms and changing rooms, pose significant challenges and harm for adolescents, especially transgender individuals. In a national school climate survey, "46.5% of transgender and gender-nonconforming students had been required to use the bathroom of their legal sex" (GLSEN, 2017, p. 5). As Greytak et al. (2013) argue, "gender segregation within school facilities (i.e., bathrooms, locker rooms, and physical education classes) …all pose particular challenges for transgender students" (p. 60). When asked about difficult places in school, Justice referred to gym as particularly difficult.

I tend to avoid locker rooms. In middle school I was out, and everyone thought, 'Justice is looking at me change.' *I wasn't.* I was more focused on changing and getting out. Whenever I'm dressing, I just get to my own business and blank on everything else, but I still feel like a pervert because I'm not really supposed to be in there, but I have to by law. I hate [it] so much. So, I tend to avoid locker rooms as much as possible. When I do have to go to the locker room, I usually go into one of the bathroom stalls to avoid [people thinking], 'oh she is watching me change.'

Teachers

Transgender individuals experience significant harassment and harmful slurs from individuals they encounter in school. More specifically, 95.3% heard sexual orientation slurs, 94% heard negative remarks about gender expression, and 87.4% heard negative remarks about transgender individuals. Students who face daily harassment do not always

report their abuse. In their experiences, "Negative staff members' attitudes toward LGBTQ students may result in an underreporting of incidents because students believe either no action will be taken or reporting an incident might make the situation worse" (Boyland, Kirkeby, & Boyland, 2018, p. 5).

Teacher response. When asked about their school experiences and spaces in the school, Justice frequently referenced his teachers and other school staff. He indicated several supportive teachers, but many of his words describe how teachers refused to honor gender identification, pronouns, and his chosen name. Justice began,

> There are a lot of teachers who I feel are really supportive, and I can always go to the counseling office if I need a minute. [I also] love my English room. Ms. Thomas is an absolutely wonderful teacher. Not trying to play favorites, but she is a really wonderful teacher. I find that she is really nice, and her room is very calm. I really like being there because it is very nice and small, because she has made it that way. [Sometimes,] I'm in the middle of class, and really stiff and obviously uncomfortable and not having a good time…the teachers will try to talk to me. [There are some classes] that are just chill, and everyone is pretty cool, and teachers are really supportive.

> *Teacher slurs.* When asked about (un)safe spaces in the school, again, Justice mentioned teachers. As indicated above, some of his teachers are supportive, but many were not responsive to gender identity or chosen names. During our interview time, he used the term "dead named," as how teachers dishonor his wishes surrounding gender identity as well as his chosen name. Justice described,

Ms. Howard kept on saying my dead name and I told one of my friends

[and he told her] his name is Justice and she said, 'I don't try to call **her**

that because she keeps on changing **her** name.' But I told her immediately,

hey, I prefer to be called Justice.

Spatial Considerations

Students in a national school climate survey reported feeling especially unsafe or

uncomfortable in spaces unmonitored by school staff such as the cafeteria, school busses,

and hallways. (GLSEN, 2017 p. 8) Justice also discussed that his safety and acceptances

varied depending on space (i.e., classrooms versus hallways). When asked about specific

spaces of support Justice described,

I have both peers and teachers who shut [bullying and teasing] down when they

hear it. The main thing is most kids don't say stuff like that where a teacher is

around to hear. You know, usually it's in the hallway during passing time. When

it is super loud and chaotic, and nobody actually knows what is happening.

Events and (Un)helpful Spaces

Schools can significantly improve the experiences of LGBTQ individuals in many

ways, including curriculum and inclusive policies. Another critical addition is GSA.

When schools added a GSA to their list of activities, students "were less likely to hear

gay used in a negative way or other homophobic or negative remarks about gender and

were less likely to feel unsafe in school" (GLSEN, 2017, p. 7). Justice explained parts of

his school that are safe and accepting.

We have the GSA and safe space posters on the wall, and all of that is really cool,

but God, I really value the fine arts department. And at this school the fine arts are

super underrated. Everyone is all about sports, all the time. And the fine arts are really cool. I found the musical was [supportive of] people that struggle emotionally and have physical disadvantages or struggle with mental illness and just struggle in general. There is one kid who is non-binary [and has] dyslexia. And there is Katie who struggles with her sight. I find that [the musical] is a lot more accepting in every *single* area.

Justice referenced places and policies in school that are helpful and supportive; however, he spent a significant amount of time describing challenging places. One specific place mentioned several times during his interview was bathrooms.

Bathrooms. Feelings, perceptions, and realities of bathroom safety impact much of transgender individuals' experiences. In schools where gender-neutral bathrooms were not an option, students reported feeling unsafe and reported lower grades than their cisgender peers. In addition, many individuals experience "adverse physical health, such as dehydration and urinary tract or bladder infections, from avoiding or waiting to use the bathroom" (Wernick et al. 2017, p. 918).

At this point, Boyton has a temporary gender-neutral bathroom, located in a remote part of the building that students do not frequently encounter. With only five minutes of passing time, it is difficult for students to use this bathroom. Based on Justice's lived experiences, this denial of a basic human necessity is often the worst part of his school day. Justice explained,

Bathrooms, I hate bathrooms. I can't really use the bathrooms. I'm really uncomfortable with that because I'm not going to go to the girl's bathroom, and I'm not comfortable using the guys bathroom. Because the whole transphobia

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stuff. So, I hate bathrooms, ultra-hate, like *absolutely* hate them. So, I silently die inside as I go to use the bathroom.

Resolution

School experiences for LGBTQ individuals are often dependent on the location of the school. For example, "LGBTQ students in a rural/small town faced more hostile school climates than students in urban and suburban schools, including experiencing high rates of biased language, victimization, and anti-LGBTQ discriminatory school policies and practices" (GLSEN, 2017, p. 15). LGBTQ students in rural areas often feel that moving away might solve many of their problems. When asked if he saw a future in Boyton, Justice responded,

> I have a very, very, set plan. [I'd] like to move away from Boyton so I can start
> fresh. I [want to go to] college—and then, me and a few friends are planning on
> moving to [a big city] and living and working there. I know a lot of people who
> move to [big cities] because it is a lot more accepting.

In the end, Justice passionately concluded, "There is absolutely NO future for me here. Dear God, No!"

Chapter Seven: Conclusions and Discussion

Conclusions

Introduction

Scholarship included in this dissertation suggests that homophobia and transphobia are prevalent in the world, including our schools (Yarbrough, 2004; Nagoshi, Adams, Terrell, Hill, Brzuzy & Nagoshi, 2008). Scholars referenced throughout this work have suggested that LGBTQ students in rural spaces and schools are more likely to experience these harmful practices and structures. Others contrast that notion by labeling the rural space as accepting and safe. By categorizing this phenomenon in a binary fashion of safe versus unsafe, scholars leave much of the in-betweenness absent from the discussion.

Simple answers are troublesome as they leave out any alternatives. As suggested by Ayers (2005), "Simple explanations that ignore complication in an impatient determination to get to the bottom line or root cause are worse than useless. They give a false impression that we have explained something when we have not" (p. 135). Principally, the space of Boyton might be classified as rural, and therefore homophobic and transphobic. However, there are many other factors present in this space that make it unique and worth further analysis.

My hope for this dissertation is to question, analyze, and possibly challenge the "accepted" narrative through the individual stories, insights, and suggestions of LGBTQ students, their teachers, and administrators. My employment of space, spatial justice, and feminism are important for analysis, but the stories of my participants serve as the critical component. Their stories detail the multiple ways in which their rural school and

community impact their lives. Their lived experiences have the potential to emphasize problems and harmful elements of their school and possibly recreate this space in ways that empower and encompass everyone who enters.

Based on the lived experiences and realities of Jamie, Charlie, and Justice, however, helpful events that leave them feeling safe and accepted are rare and complicated. Events they described as positive came with exceptions, and in most instances, they experience more bullying, exclusion, and negative experiences than companionship and care. Participants described the rural space of Boyton as heteronormatively constructed in ways that increase homophobic and transphobic actions. However, these detrimental structures would not be possible without individuals upholding and enacting them.

Individual actions. In addition to previous scholarship included in this work, this final chapter also considers the work of van Kessel and Crowley (2017). They argue that when analyzing harmful structures and practices (in this case, homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity), it is also essential to consider the everyday actions and non-actions of people (not just structures) that contribute to participant lives. Citing van Kessel and Crowley,

> villainification narratives—and the conceptualization of evil they promote—do greater harm. By oversimplifying and over-individualizing certain types of "evil," villainification obscures our understanding of how we perpetuate evil through our daily actions…There is a need to examine the broader system in play, but such an examination needs to be done without absolving those who comprise this system of their responsibility, regardless of whether they are aware of their complicity.

The task of antivillainification, in part, removes our false sense of comfort that evil is other, and not "us," and calls upon us to engage with a more complete analysis of historical actors and contingencies, with an emphasis on the personal implications. (p. 429)

Essentially, Jamie, Charlie, and Justice described their lived experiences with family, peers, and school staff. Their words reinforce the presence of harmful societal structures, but for the most part, their words detail everyday actions, reactions, and non-actions of individuals in their lives. Specifically, teachers and other staff outwardly enacting homophobia and transphobia, teachers and other staff avoiding or not responding to homophobic or transphobic actions of students, and administrators who minimize these harmful actions and require do nothing more than require students to write an insincere apology letter. Therefore, when analyzing the lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals, this dissertation considers these descriptions and emotions. van Kessel and Crowley (2017) encourage a "sensibility of interconnected responsibility among members of a society instead of blaming one person for systemic harm or diffusing blame into an amorphous entity (e.g., "society") (p. 427).

Summary. The final chapter of this dissertation serves as an analysis of Jamie, Charlie, and Justice's lived experiences. My analysis will consider participant narratives, previous scholarship, and employ theories of space, spatial justice, feminism, and antivillainification. It will also include a segment detailing interview data from adults who participated in an LGBTQ professional development activity at the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year.

Based on my analysis, I argue that LGBTQ individuals in Boyton described many experiences with individuals and spaces that offer support, but they also filled their descriptions with exceptions and incompatibilities. As such, I dedicate the majority of this chapter to those incompatibilities.

Also, participant experiences may be partially due to harmful societal structures of heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia. But naming these structures as "villain" dismisses individuals' everyday actions and non-actions in their lives. I would also argue that individual actions might result from dispositions based on a community's spatial makeup. However, dismantling these dispositions requires acknowledging that individual actions, reactions, and non-actions can influence community spatial dispositions and change the day-to-day experiences of LGBTQ members.

Lived Experiences: Incompatible Moments in Boyton

Incompatible Moments

Jamie, Charlie, and Justice provided rich, thoughtful, and compelling descriptions of individuals and activities in their school and community. They often began with moments of value, but in many instances, they followed up these examples with descriptions of non-acceptance, discrimination, bullying, and harm. For example, all three characters described Boyton as an excellent place to live and attend school, but those benefits come with exceptions and stipulations. Overall, many of the experiences they described were multifarious, and their words included incompatible emotions and experiences.

These incompatible moments may partially be due to the inherent nature of qualitative interviews that often mimic the "commonalities with everyday social

interactions in which persons strive to present themselves in a favorable light" (Collins,

Shattell & Thomas, 2005, p. 188). More specifically, I feel participants were aware of my

investment as a teacher in Boyton and may have been trying to speak accordingly to

support my profession. Collins, Shattell, and Thomas (2005) suggest, "An informant may

even make an effort to speak the interviewer's 'language' . . . rather than his or her own"

(p. 190). However, my role as their teacher may have also been part of their motivation to

expand on their answers as my longevity in Boyton might allow me to empathize and

possibly collaborate for change. Citing Seidman (2013),

> the researcher may find connections among the experiences of the individuals
>
> [they interview]. Such links among people whose individual lives are quite
>
> different but who are affected by common structure and social forces can help the
>
> reader see patterns in that experience. (p. 55)

Individual Actions and Non-action

Previous scholarship within this dissertation suggests that recreating LGBTQ

inclusive spaces requires the dismantling of the damaging societal structures of

homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity. (Schmidt 2010) argued that society

(including schools), is failing to recognize that bullying and other such behaviors and

actions towards LGBTQ individuals are symptomatic of structural heteronormativity.

Citing Schmidt, "The heteronormative culture threatens the full inclusion of LGBTQ

youth and families into school communities and undermines access to quality education"

(p. 315).

I concur with Schmidt, as I witness these structures at work. For example, Boyton

continues their "traditions" of homecoming king and queen, powder puff football games,

dress codes specifically directed at boys or girls, gender-exclusive spaces and signage, and pictures or artwork that normalize binary gender and heterosexual relationships. Validation for these practices might come from heteronormative structures present in society; however, I argue, and my participants describe that, day-to-day actions and inactions of people in their lives have far-reaching consequences.

Summary

Overall, I argue that structures are problematic and require dismantling. However, if we place all blame on societal structures, we wrongfully dismiss the everyday actions and non-actions of families, peers, and school faculty. As suggested by van Kessel and Crowley (2017), this "villainification" leads to "diffusing responsibility to the point that no one is responsible…Both (in)famous individuals and the group of unknown people who comprise 'society' created the situation" (p. 437). Therefore, actions and non-actions of individuals warrant consideration and analysis.

The following sections will serve as an analysis of participant narratives that highlight the presence of incompatibilities in Jamie, Charlie, and Justice's emotions and experiences. It will also include ways in which these incompatibilities result from the societal structures of homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity. It will also address the everyday actions and non-actions of the people in their lives who are often contributors and "villains" in their lived experiences (van Kessel & Crowley, 2017). Incompatible moments were frequent and made up a great deal of participant experiences; the following segments serve to highlight *some* of those moments.

Character

So, there are certain times when I hide parts of myself. And it just makes me really panicky, I mean because it is like I'm living two different lives.

Incompatibilities in Living and Coming Out in Boyton

Living in Boyton. Jamie, Charlie, and Justice suggested that they value Boyton's community, including the dedication of its teachers. Justice suggested many people move to Boyton because of its schools, but there are incompatibilities in the "good school" narrative. Citing Justice, "I have heard so many parents talking about how they moved here [because] all they heard was good reviews, but [these were] all families with straight, white, children."

Coming out in Boyton. Coming out narratives also included incompatibilities in participant emotions and experiences. For example, Jamie said, regarding her dad, "I don't know if I would call him homophobic, but he's not really nice about that stuff all of the time." In addition, Jamie described her mother as supportive. However, she also thinks she may wish things were different. Jamie attributes this to her mom's future hopes for her. Jamie suggested, "[My mom] always tells me how she has a dream of me getting married and having kids and stuff like that, and I guess she thinks that won't happen if I'm [gay]" Cohn and Hastings (2010) explained this phenomenon surrounding families. They argued, "[rural areas have] a strong emphasis on bloodlines, the creation of family—presumably heterosexual family" (p. 71). In this instance, it seems that Jamie's mom cannot reconcile her heteronormative vision of what a family looks like, with the family her daughter may envision for herself. Her mom is accepting, but that acceptance comes with incompatible moments.

Similar incompatibilities were further present in Jamie's narrative, as well as Charlie and Justice's narratives. They all described having accepting family and peers but then added that they still worry about certain people finding out, and frequently the topic

is avoided or disbelieved. Also, when allowed to keep her sexual orientation hidden to peers, Charlie chose this option.

  Selective. Jamie described that she is out to members of the GSA but then added how "draining" it can be. She explained, "What if this person finds out? What am I going to say?" Charlie also suggested that she is out to "most of my friends." However, when describing her history day project on the Stonewall riots, she said: "I remember we [had to have] three-book sources and I [thought] I can't go to the library and get a book, because if someone sees that they are gonna—say things." Justice described coming out in school because he "[wanted people to understand who I am and respect who I am." He followed that up with "I walk into a classroom; people won't greet me with my chosen name. I know there are specifically some students are just not ok with it. And yea, I just don't interact with them."

  Avoidance and disbelief. In her narrative, Charlie concluded her thoughts about coming out to her family with the words, "I got so lucky—that I didn't have angry parents." In reference to her mom, however, she suggested, "I don't think she's fully acknowledged it's a thing." In addition, Justice suggested a similar situation with her mom and dad. He described them as "trying," but "we really don't talk about the way I feel because that's just *not* what we *do*." Justice added that some members of his family said, "[He was not] real, and that [he] was just imagining it, and it was a phase and [he] was experimenting."

  Selective outness. Charlie described being out to family members and friends, and among those closest to her, she feels accepted and said, "I got lucky that I didn't have

angry parents." When moving to a postsecondary program, however, Charlie chose not to be out. She explained,

> I wanted to make friends because I feel at Boyton as soon as you come out…there is a bubble around you and it's very hard to make friends…And I have made more friends this year than I have in a long time, and they're all different types of people. [And] I wanted them to like me for my opinions. I feel like it's easier to be closer to people when they don't think you are different so; I've been lucky enough to kind of get a fresh start

Overall, Jamie, Charlie, and Justice described many incompatible moments in their lives, which could be due to Boyton's harmful societal structures. However, participants words and descriptions indicate that everyday actions and non-actions of those closest to them significantly contribute to their experiences.

Considering Antivillainification in Living and Coming Out in Boyton

Responses and inactions of family and peers may be a result of the heteronormative structures present in Boyton, that "assume all students are heterosexual and…will find a spouse of the opposite sex" (Schmidt, 2010, p. 320). Research cannot oversimplify these societal structures as solely responsible, as participants, family members, and friends, actions, and non-actions are significant contributors to their lived experiences. Grafsky (2018) argued that being able to come out to their families often allowed sexual minority youth to be closer to their families and live authentic lives. However, coming out was not always possible for everyone, as many sexual minority youths are "often afraid of rejections or fear that the parent-child relationship will be damaged as a result of disclosure" (p. 784).

Individual actions (suggesting disbelief, intentionally misnaming) and non-actions (unwillingness to discuss the topic) are impactful moments among LGBTQ individuals in Boyton. As suggested by van Kessel and Crowley (2017), villains in Jamie, Charlie, and Justice's lives are not only harmful societal structures but also the people they live and interact with daily. Citing van Kessel and Crowley, "Ordinary people considered to be decent citizens perpetuate extensive evils…day after day, with supper at home and picnics on the weekends" (p. 433). As suggested by a Boyton administrator, "I haven't seen a large movement of kids against certain communities. But [there is an] underlying tone of the conservativism and, not accepting of differences."

Setting

If you don't look a certain way, and have a certain set of beliefs, and are in a certain friend group, then you are ignored, bullied, or walked over.
-Jamie (2019)

Incompatibilities in Relationships

Jamie, Charlie, and Justice indicated they value the close-knit quality of their community, as many people have lived here their entire lives, know each other, and often celebrate together. Incompatibilities in their narratives indicate that, due to several factors, Boyton might more appropriately be described as close-minded.

Relationships with peers. Peer relationships are an important part of participants' lives; however, contingencies and incompatibilities are present in their descriptions. Jamie said, "It feels great to have friends and peers that you get along with and talk to, but with some peers, you can't talk to them, you can't really be around them." Charlie also suggested, "I am out to most of my friends... but It's just—the hardest thing

when your peers look at you different. Feeling like you don't belong even if you have lived in Boyton your entire life." Justice also expressed,

> [I am] pretty much out to all my friends… I have a couple of [close] friends, but nobody super close…There have always been people who told me I'm going to hell, [and suggest] "you should come to church we will fix you right up."

Relationships in school. Jamie, Charlie, and Justice began descriptions of their experiences in school as supportive, but again their descriptions were filled with incompatible moments. Justice began, "I like the high school. Most of the teachers I've met [want to know] my name or my pronouns or identity, but also suggested,

> Ms. Howard kept on saying my dead name and I told one of my friends [and he told her] his name is Justice and she said, 'I don't try to call **her** that because she keeps on changing **her** name.' But I told her immediately, hey, I prefer to be called Justice.

Charlie also suggested, "I like Boyton, or at least I think I do. It is not a bad place," But followed that up with, "It's just there are a lot of things that go unchecked." Jamie also described, "It feels really great to have friends and peers [that] you get along with and talk to," but also suggested, "I'm not one of them, which is stupid, because we are all the exact same person because we all live in the same town…But they treat me like I'm not."

Relationships in the community. Jamie, Charlie, and Justice provided encouraging descriptions of their community. Citing Jamie, "I really like the town. Mostly our closeness and how easy it is to talk to everybody. [I like] most of the people.

It is kind of a small town, but not tiny, which I really like." She later suggested, [But] if you are not the same as everyone. Then you are not going to fit in."

Incompatibilities of close-knit and close-minded were also present in Charlie and Justice's narratives. Charlie indicated that, in a small town, there are pros and cons to closeness. She referenced that this close-knit quality often allows for community gatherings and fun events. She also attributed these structures, however, as contributing to close-mindedness. Citing Charlie,

[This community is] kind of stuck. They have such a bad view of gay people. And it's hard to have a discussion with a community who is so stuck in that. Who is so close-minded about the idea. [And] I feel we are not connected. It's like Boyton community doesn't care about me. I feel like there has never been that connection.

Justice said, "Yea, I do like stuff about the community. [I like] most of the people." In contrast, however, he said "I tend to avoid playgrounds and stuff now. Unless I am with other people. Because there have been a lot of times where I have been called dyke or faggot."

Considering Antivillainification and Relationships

Boyton is a close-knit community for some of its residents; however, the perceptions and realities of Jamie, Charlie, and Justice described it more accurately as close-minded and "kind of stuck." Heteronormativity or societal beliefs and practices, both purposeful and hidden, often determine what is "normal" (Nagoshi et al., 2008). It may also contribute to participant exclusion from their "close-knit" community. However, more evident in their words were incidents of individual actions (people who

told me I'm going to hell, called me dyke or faggot) and inactions (there are just a lot of things that go unchecked, I am not one of them). van Kessel and Crowley (2017) advise on the importance of individual actions. More importantly, they warn of the detriments of solely blaming villainous societal structures. Citing this work, "villainification narratives—and the conceptualization of evil they promote—do greater harm. By oversimplifying and over-individualizing certain types of "evil," villainification obscures our understanding of how we perpetuate evil through our daily actions" (p. 429).

Boyton teacher and GSA advisor Lou described her perceptions surrounding Boyton's close-minded expectations that serve as requirements for being considered a member of its close-knit community. She remembered,

> And I just felt like everybody tried to look the same here. Like when I walked in, I remember thinking, they all look exactly the same and that was really an eye opener for me. That everybody really needs to fit in, and they have to conform to what that status quo is, or they get ostracized.

Problems

*Because there is not really anything in the curriculum about LGBT history, there is nothing in the curriculum about relationships and sex—**period**, much less LGBT relationships, and sex and how to be safe with **that**.*

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Justice (2019)

Incompatibilities in School

Curriculum and Classrooms. Scholarship within this work indicates that many LGBTQ individuals do not experience LGBTQ inclusive curriculum in their schools (Crocco, 2002; Schmidt, 2010). Jamie and Charlie indicated a similar situation. They

began by indicating that some of their teachers are trying, but followed up with incompatible moments, as inclusive efforts often result in harmful responses.

Jamie indicated, [And] it's really important to learn about it [or] at least see representation in history because we've [LGBTQ individuals] existed forever." Jamie followed up her words of encouragement with examples of how she is directly (often harmfully) impacted by the curriculum. Jamie described,

> And Ms. Johnson said something like we're going to be talking about women and gay people and getting rights for them…. And everyone was like are you kidding me? Like why do we need to learn about gay people? And it was just kind of negative. Everyone has such a negative mindset about it.

> Charlie indicated, "There are a couple of teachers that really, really push for visibility…especially the English department really pushes for visibility and representation, and it's wonderful to see them try." She followed these words, however, with the incompatibilities that come with inclusion. "[And] if we have a unit [and] somebody mentions a gay person in history or literature, people look at me and then whisper."

Teachers. When asked to describe their school, Jamie, Charlie, and Justice spent a significant amount of time describing their teachers. In some cases, they described their teachers as supportive and "trying" but much of what they shared indicated teachers were a source of bullying, both indirectly (with inaction and avoidance) and directly (with their words).

Inaction and avoidance. Jamie began, "The teachers are very, very great…It gives me a warm feeling to know that I have classes with certain teachers because you

know it's going to be an enjoyable class." She went on to describe how the inaction of teachers sometimes made classes difficult.

> And some kids in one of my classes said something along the lines of 'go back to the cotton fields' [and] they used the 'N' word… and then the teacher was not shutting it down and was listening to it. And [responded with] "whatever, boys will be boys."

Charlie's descriptions also contained incompatible moments with teachers. She began with, "I feel like a few teachers understand.," but then continued with harmful experiences. Citing Charlie,

> [The teachers] understand it's a problem with students who are gay and get made fun of, but some have no idea…But I feel like at a certain point, if a kid gets called faggot every day…you need to do something…There are teachers that overhear remarks like 'that's so gay,' or very homophobic things and they don't say anything or even look bothered. I feel like there are a lot of times where teachers don't see whats going on, but I feel like there are a lot of times when teachers do, and they just choose to ignore it.

Teachers' slurs. In addition to inactions and avoidance of their teachers, their descriptions also contained many incompatible moments where teachers were a source of the bullying. Charlie suggested, "I have a few teachers that understand," but then suggested her teachers were often a source of homophobic and transphobic actions. Charlie described, [I had a teacher who was] transphobic to a student who was going through a name change, and her response was 'call me when it is legal.' Justice described "There are a lot of teachers who are really supportive, and I can always go to the

counseling office if I need a minute." However, he also described, "Ms. Howard kept on saying my dead name, and I told one of my friends [and he told her] his name is Justice, and she said, 'I don't try to call **her** that because she keeps changing **her** name.'"

School policies. When school resumed in the fall of 2019, many teachers had posted the Boyton logo adorned with a rainbow and the words *Everyone Welcome*. School inclusive efforts are in place, but enactments of them are inconsistent, and participants, especially Charlie, do not have faith in these policies or administrators.

For Charlie, these gestures and school policies are a good start but are not enough. She began with "We do have those things that we put on doors now. Like the [Boyton logo] with the rainbow sticker on it… [And] the GSA [announcement] is on the [announcements] screens… oh, we have the GSA posters and all of that," but then continued with incompatibilities in these gestures.

> Like the [Boyton logo] with the rainbow on it. It's kind of like when you put the 'I donated' sign on your car bumper. You did that, and thanks, but what else did you do? Thank you for showing that you're open to it, but what else have you done? I've never seen a teacher come to our GSA… [And the GSA signs] get torn down.

Charlie then went on to describe "we got new administrators. They said they were gonna enact a new bullying policy," but she finished this statement with inconsistencies in these policies. Citing Charlie, "My dad and I were at that [meeting] and we looked at each other like we were going to laugh because we knew it wasn't gonna change."

Considering Antivillainification in School

Curriculum. For the most part, LGBTQ curriculum and representation is absent from Boyton High School, as Justice indicated, "The only LGBT representation I have ever seen in this school is the GSA posters." A possible reason behind this exclusion may be standards-based teaching, which essentially provides teachers with a list of what to teach. Because LGBTQ issues are absent from the standards of this midwestern state, they are often absent from the classroom (Avery, 2002; Crocco, 2002; Schmidt, 2010). Schmidt (2010) suggested, "The curriculum, space, and social functions of schools are powerful forces" (p. 315), and teachers who are unwilling to bring in issues outside of the state standards are disadvantaging students in their classrooms. Participant words suggest that some Boyton teachers are "trying." Charlie explained, "the English department really pushes for visibility and representation, and it's wonderful to see them try." Jamie said, "it is just good to finally have [LGBTQ] history and show it to everybody else."

Standards-based teaching may be the villain in this scenario, but teachers' individual actions, decisions, and non-actions should also be considered. Teachers can be gatekeepers and decision-makers of their content, curriculum, and instruction (Thornton, 2002); therefore, they often have an opportunity to include LGBTQ issues within their instruction. However, based on the experiences of participants, most Boyton teachers are choosing standards. Like other areas in Jamie, Charlie, and Justice's lives, the villain could be structural, but in their words, the villain is often people they encounter every day. As argued by van Kessel and Crowley (2017), "The realization that so-called "ordinary" people [teachers] are, in fact, agents of change is an important lesson" (p. 448).

School staff and policies. In many incidents, participants described individual teacher actions and slurs (call me when it's legal) as contributing to their experiences in Boyton. They also described the inaction of their teachers and other school staff (ineffective policies) in response to the bullying and harassment they often experience. Although the Boyton student handbook includes language in its harassment policy that lists gender and sexuality, incidents often go unchecked. Lou, who is a Boyton teacher and GSA advisor, recounted the harassment experienced by a student-athlete,

I found out that there was a male soccer player that came out to his family and then to his team. Right before the soccer season started the coach [told him] he could not dress in the locker room with the rest of the players. So, [this player] had to come to every game fully dressed, and then would have to leave in his uniform. He didn't have a place to dress. And [the player] would not make a big deal about it because he had a scholarship on the line and didn't want to lose playing time. He didn't want it to adversely affect him. But I do remember having [a] conversation with the coach. I said, Coach, I heard that you are not letting [a player] dress with the team. He said, 'well, how could I?' And I said, what do you mean? He said, 'well he's gay. No, I can't do that what if—something happens?' And I said, he's more likely to be the target than anybody else. He is probably more in fear of being in that locker room and being gay in this town than anything. I was just so shocked that I couldn't believe it. And I felt my hands were tied because I couldn't do anything while [the player] was here, which is terrible. And that person is still coaching.

The coach's words and actions in this situation seem to be fostered by homophobia; however, dismissing his individual choices and actions is detrimental. van Kessel and Crowley (2017) argue, "Although it is unfortunate that we do not often see how we can inadvertently help others and make systemic change, it is very disturbing when we fail to see our own part in the suffering of others" (p. 427). In this instance, the coach could alter his course—but did nothing, even at the advice of a colleague.

In addition to this coach's actions, it seems ineffective school policies intended to protect students from harassment are also responsible. The student in Lou's narrative did not perceive the school policy intended to protect LGBTQ individuals at Boyton as helpful. The player chose not to report (or let Lou report) his situation for fear of repercussion because he felt it would be more harmful than helpful.

Similar reasons behind students choosing not to report harassment and bullying incidents were indicated in a national school climate survey where 55.3% of participants said they chose not to report incidences of harassment and assault. More specifically, participants suggested that reporting would not result in interventions, but would instead make the situation worse (GLSEN, 2017). In all, individual actions, and inactions on the part of school staff should be considered alongside harmful societal structures as significant factors in the lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals in Boyton.

Events and (un)helpful spaces

I joined [the GSA] because I wanted to expand my knowledge of what it's like to be gay in places that aren't Boyton…and the person who leads it, she wanted to help but there wasn't much she could do.

<div align="right">Charlie (2019)</div>

When asked about helpful and supportive spaces in Boyton, Jamie, Charlie, and Justice referenced the GSA, as "really cool" (Justice, 2019), but even this typically safe

space was often a space of harassment and stress. Jamie described, "When we first took a tour [of the high school], and the GSA posters were up, that [felt] pretty good." However, she went on to say that GSA can be a source of harassment, especially on social media. In one instance, she showed me a Snapchat with a picture of the Pride flag captioned with the words 'fricking disgusting'."

Charlie was appreciative of the GSA, as it was one of her safe school spaces, but the threat of her peers finding out made this space a source of stress. She described her experiences attending meetings,

> I didn't want him (her friend) to see, and it's not that I was ashamed of being in the GSA, because I love it. But it was just *him* knowing. I was scared how he would take it. Because he isn't the most accepting person.

> Lou, a teacher, and GSA advisor, at Boyton, also described incompatibilities surrounding GSA. When asked about her role as the advisor she responded,

> My current goals are just trying to make sure that they feel like there is a good place for them. That they belong. One student came to meetings his senior year and told me he wished he would have come earlier, because he had no idea that people would be that nice to him.

She continued with exceptions,

> And I wish that it wasn't scary to walk in the doors of the GSA meeting. [More specifically], I wish it wasn't scary for other kids to see you walk in the door. Because once they got there, I knew they would be feeling good, and they would come back.

Lou also suggested that she wished more individuals would attend GSA meetings, but many kids are "targeted if they come." However, she is comforted by her belief that those who have stopped coming have "found their space." Like scholars within this work, Lou believes the mere presence of a GSA, is a benefit to the entire student body, Citing Mayo (2013),

> The presence of a GSA does not solve the problems faced by LGBTQ-identified youth and their allies, but it is one part of a larger solution because it positively affects the school experiences of many youth regardless of whether they actually attend meetings. (p. 357)

In reference to the safety that the Boyton GSA provides, Lou suggested,

> Just existing helps kids even if they are not ready to come. Just existing helps people know that there is somebody that's got their back. And it is surprising that kids that I don't know come to me about LGBTQ issues, because they know I will fight for them, which I appreciate. *They know I will fight for them.*

Antivillainification and (Un)helpful Spaces

Homophobia may be one of the causes of student reactions to the GSA in Boyton, as it often results in people upholding heterosexuality by "denouncing anything that seems to challenge it… and [humiliating] anyone who dares to push at those boundaries" (Schmidt, 2010, p. 320). Socioeconomic status may also contribute to these actions as working-class boys often reacted with "masculine 'protest' bravado, flouting school rules and conventions" (such as tearing down GSA signs) (Morris, 2001, p. 222). Neither of these structures, however, should be considered solely responsible. Individual prejudice and actions are also responsible for participants' incompatibilities in their descriptions

surrounding the GSA. When asked about his feelings surrounding the GSA, and reasons he chose to tear down GSA signs, Chris responded, "I have never really had any negative thoughts or anything towards [the GSA]. I would never see myself joining, but just because someone else wants to wouldn't make me look down on them."

In reference to tearing down the signs Chris suggested, "That was a complete joke, with me and my friends. And I can see how that upset some people, and I didn't understand [at the time] I thought it was just a joke."

Homophobia may be one cause of student reactions to the GSA and tearing down signs. Avery, the teacher who witnessed this event, shared her remembrances. Citing Avery,

> And after going back and forth with [him about what he was hiding] I realized it
> was a GSA poster. He then suggested he thought it was funny to take them down.
> And I said you know that is a hate crime, and he said…'it's not a hate crime, I just
> like taking down posters…everyone does it.'

van Kessel and Crowley (2017) provide guidance that surrounds Chris's actions. They suggest, "this evil is a form of thoughtlessness—not a lack of thinking per se (i.e., mindlessly following orders), but a lack of critical thought about how an individual can affect others" (p. 431).

School policies were not helpful in the destruction of property, as students caught tearing down GSA signs suffered minimal consequences. About Chris's actions, Avery said, "he got lunch detention as his punishment." Charlie discussed an apology letter written to the GSA (meant as punishment) in a separate incident when an individual tore down a GSA sign. In Charlie's words, his consequences were the "kindergarten

equivalent" of actual punishment. Instead of having to apologize to GSA members in person, this individual had to write a letter. Charlie explained,

But I feel like at a certain point, if a kid gets called a faggot every day, you saying the wrong terminology isn't going to hurt them as badly. But they [seem] to walk on eggshells because they don't want to get in trouble if they screw up. But at the same time…you need to do *something*. But you know, there isn't much to do. Cuz you can complain about it, but nothing gets done. You get the letter. *The letter.*

Resolution

I want to find a community where [I] can be accepted. There is no future for me here. Dear God, NO!

<div align="right">-Jamie and Justice</div>

(2019)

Despite saying that Boyton was known for its close-knit community and good schools, Jamie, Charlie, and Justice indicated they want to leave. They summarized,

I want to live somewhere more relaxed because in Boyton if you are gay, or Black or fricking just different, it is automatically an issue. If your family doesn't make a certain amount of money you are different, and why would I want to be around that? Yea, I can't see myself staying. I'm so excited to get away. I want to find a community where [I] can be accepted. There is no future for me here. Dear God, NO!

Antivillainification and Leaving Boyton

In all, the lived experiences of Jamie, Charlie, and Justice suggest they often do not feel safety, comfort, or acceptance in Boyton. They do not experience consistency in their interactions with family, peers, community members, or school personnel. Although

many of their experiences might be blamed on homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity, placing the blame solely on these structures, lessens the actions and responsibility of many individuals. Therefore, I argue that in addition to harmful structures, it is essential to consider the actions and non-actions of individuals they encounter every day, including family members, peers, teachers, and administrators. van Kessel and Crowley (2017) argue,

> Ordinary people, living their mundane lives, can easily slip into the sort of thoughtlessness that Arendt (1963/2006) described, with a cumulative effect of creating and sustaining systemic harm…Rather, we ought to live in the tension of being neither innocent nor guilty. We can be genuinely thoughtful, examining our (in)actions and change because we realize that what we do (or do not do) matters. Instead of resolving our anxieties and fears by shifting blame onto a villain, we can consider how we might make changes that affect, and are amplified by, our interconnections. (p. 446)

Space, Spatial Justice, Feminism and Antivillainification

I feel the community is kind of like in a bubble and just focused on this area [and unaware] there is a world outside of this community.
-Boyton Administrator, 2019

Space

Participants (both students and adults) described the rural community surrounding Boyton High School as being uniquely constructed in many ways, including political and religious dispositions, and socioeconomic status. Participants also dichotomously described Boyton as both close-knit and close-minded. They also referred to Boyton as a good school, and "many have moved here [because] all they heard was good reviews,"

but went on to clarify "[these were] all families with straight, white, children" (Justice, 2019).

The uniqueness of this space, as it impacts the lived experiences of participants, warrants consideration. Location, actions, and reactions of people are "intricately intertwined with youths' distinctive social locations related to their intersecting identities and environmental contexts" (Schmitz and Tyler, 2018, p. 3). Therefore, this dissertation employs spatial theory to analyze how the unique spatial construction of a rural school and community impacts and contributes to the lived experiences of 10 LGBTQ individuals.

Spatial Justice

Socially constructed hierarchical and discriminatory power structures, including heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia, impact spatial construction. Soja (2010) argued, "space is actively involved in generating and sustaining inequality, injustice, economic exploitation, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression" (p. 4). Specifically, in Boyton, political dispositions, religiosity, and SES are elements that contribute to the injustices and inequities, many of its residents' experiences. Therefore, in order to understand better policies and practices that might dismantle these power structures and injustices, he suggested a pairing of space and social justice or spatial justice.

Participants in this work suggested socially just ways to reconstruct Boyton, including curricular inclusion and activities such as GSA. Briefly, Jamie suggested, "[And] it's really important to learn about it [or] at least see representation in history because we've [LGBTQ individuals] existed for *forever* and it is just good to finally have

the history and show it to everybody else." Jamie also referenced GSA. She said, "When we first took a tour [of the high school], and the GSA posters were up, that [felt] pretty good. I was like, finally…[And], the GSA, they are very open to stuff, and I'm able to talk to people."

Charlie also suggested better school policies and better teacher responses as ways this space might be reconstructed. Briefly, "But they [seem] to walk on eggshells because they don't want to get in trouble if they screw up. But at the same time…you need to do something." Therefore, this work employs spatial justice theory to examine and recognize policies and practices that might dismantle spatial power structures and injustice, as well as practices and policies that might reconstruct it.

Feminism

Theories of space and spatial justice allow for evaluation and rethinking of space, but as suggested by Massey (2001), social and spatial justice has not moved far enough past the voices of "white, male, heterosexual, western" (p. 225). Therefore, this work employs feminist theory, which intends to complement and challenge space and spatial justice. It does so by insisting that the voices of those silenced are included and heard in ways that allow for a joining of forces. In this case, the joining of LGBTQ individuals with their peers, teachers, and administrators might allow for significant change. For example, participants in this work suggested that better school policies and supportive teachers might improve schools. Based on Jamie, Charlie, and Justice's words, Boyton has much room for improvement. Briefly citing Charlie,

> [The teachers] *understand* it's a problem, and they acknowledge it, but some have
>
> no idea. [And] I feel a lot of the higher faculty don't acknowledge it. I don't know

how they could, but that's [not] my job [to figure] out. Because it is one thing to say, there should be more *help* for those students. But I think they don't know *how*.

Charlie's words indicate that essential ways in which their school might improve is for teachers to have the ability to react to homophobic and transphobic actions of their peers. Staff "know-how" to respond to these injustices might be in the form of staff development on LGBTQ issues and inclusive classrooms, curriculum, and policies. LGBTQ professional development took place in the fall of 2019. Based on participant responses (two teachers and three administrators), this training partially helped with their ability to "know-how" to join with their LGBTQ students and address problems.

In addition to the joining of forces that feminism upholds, challenging the gender binary is also an essential goal of feminism. One specific way this might happen is for research to expand upon and challenge the definition of homophobia beyond the fear of homosexuals to one that acknowledges its role in maintaining the gender binary. Murphy (2006) argued that feminist work has the potential to disrupt "homophobia's maintenance of sexism and gender inequality" (p. 210) by recognizing its role in the heterosexual/homosexual binary. In all, feminism has the potential to "dismantle the binary categories of male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, and the subsequent forces of sexism and homophobia" (p. 211).

Staff Training

During teacher workshops in the fall of 2019, approximately 100 middle school and high school teachers and administrators participated in a 90-minute professional development session in the Teaching and Learning Center. Leading this session was Curt,

a community member who conducts this work within many schools in this midwestern state. Curt is also a member of the staff at Boyton, as he is the musical director and speech coach. Curt identifies as male and gay. He lives with his partner in Boyton, where he is part of organizing the local farmers market. Information included in this segment is taken from field notes I took at this session.

During this session, Curt led five activities. The first helped participants understand the differences between sex and gender identity and sexual orientation and gender expression. The second activity discussed pronouns and name importance. This segment was followed up by an activity where participants made a nameplate, including full name, nicknames, and pronouns. Participants were then instructed to introduce themselves to their tablemates and indicate pronouns. The third activity was called four corners. Participants moved to a particular corner, depending on how they might react to a specific scenario (i.e., one student outs another on social media). Possible reactions included: (a) walk away/ignore the situation, (b) seek help, (c) talk to the person in private, (d) intervene yourself. The last activity included scenarios (i.e., a student asks, "what does gay mean"), and participants talked in pairs about how they would respond. Curt did not provide any "correct" answers but provided a handout with suggestions on ways to discuss several questions and comments (often homophobic and transphobic) teachers often hear from students.

Overall, participants engaged with the instructor and each other during the entire session. When there was time to sit and listen, they listened. When there was time to engage with each other and discuss ideas, they did. I left the session with an overwhelming sense of calm and appreciation. When our time was over, I had several

individuals thank me for the training and indicated its importance. I also had two teachers indicate their willingness to participate in follow-up interviews surrounding this session. In addition, I emailed the administrators present requesting an interview, and all three agreed.

Participants repeated two main themes during their interviews, which included: (a) indications this professional development was essential and, (b) the session on pronouns was most helpful and provided a new sense of confidence to address homophobic/transphobic bullying in school. The following segment details those themes. Similar to student composite narratives, I eliminated the vocalized pauses from adult transcripts (Seidman, 2013).

Staff Interviews and Professional Development

Introduction

A high school administrator described Boyton as a conservative community where "some kids have not been exposed to much outside this area… and [there is an] underlying tone of conservativism and not accepting of differences of others." Because family and community dispositions and conservative leanings often shape the attitudes and behaviors of young people, Boyton individuals may be cultured to believe that homosexuality is "aberrant, if not immoral, behavior" (Avery, 2002, p. 192). An adult participant reinforced this assumption, "I've noticed that Boyton has a very "homophobic feel." Since students spend a significant amount of time in school, this space profoundly impacts their lives. More specifically, "Heterosexism, heteronormativity, and homophobia [serve] as forces of oppression that [mitigate students] educational and life experiences" (Strom, 2019, p. 135).

Therefore, training faculty on ways they might interrupt these homophobic/transphobic moments seems critical. Strom (2019) argues, "engaging in processes of becoming-ally is integral to co-create classrooms that are affirmative spaces for students along with the LGBTQ and gender/sexuality expression continuum" (p. 144). Adult individuals who participated in an LGBTQ training indicated that this training was necessary, especially the segment on the importance of pronouns, as well as a new confidence in how to respond to homophobic and transphobic moments in their classroom.

Training is Important

Except for a 30 minute after school session for high school teachers on LGBTQ micro-aggressions, teachers in Boyton have not participated in this type of training, yet indicated it was needed. Martin and Strom (2019) argue that safe school policies and "LGBTQ day celebrations, gay, straight alliances (GSA's), and feel good posters, slogans, or t-shirts that proclaim allyship" are not enough and should extend their focus. Efforts need to instead "proactively engage in professional practices that promote gender equity and LGBTQ inclusive (and affirmative) values" (p. 3). Citing Addie,

> So, I read our schedule, and when I saw that we had an LGBTQ training I was like, **YES**! I had been hearing from my co-workers who didn't know the difference between gender and sexuality and that *shocked* me, so I [thought] this is why we need [this training]. Because you know being informed [is essential]. And I know there are people who don't agree with [LGBTQ identities], but at the end of the day it's [about] supporting those kids. That is what matters. It is not about how you feel or what you believe, it is about them.

Citing a high school administrator,

> This is really my first experiences working with [LGBTQ] training. And we need
> this training, understanding, and background to be able to deal with situations that
> come up. In the [administrator program] you've got a set number of classes and
> one elective…Now wouldn't it be nice if one of those classes worked with this
> type of issue?

Pronoun Importance and Confidence

The importance (and lack) of student self-identification, including chosen names
and pronouns, was indicated by LGBTQ individuals in this dissertation as a source of
harm and discrimination. Justice indicated that teachers had intentionally misgendered
him on several occasions. As our language structurally embeds gender, it often can be
used to enforce gender norms and expectations. Strom (2019) argued that misgendering is

> difficult to raise awareness about since it often isn't 'in your face' as homophobic
> language or acts of violence are. Instead, it is materialized through expectations of
> ourselves and others, which in turn are reinforced by society's expectations,
> norms, and practices.

Adult participants who were part of an LGBTQ professional development session
indicated that the portion of the training they considered most beneficial was the session,
indicating the importance of encouraging students to self-identify with their chosen
names and gender identity. They suggested this segment provided them with the means
and confidence to include this sharing in their classrooms.

As indicated by Addie, "[This training] gave me the confidence to actually ask
kids what pronouns they prefer." Bobbie also indicated, "I really liked…having

clarification about some of the terminology…like the pronouns that were supposed to use. I'm just not very practiced in using that. But it heightened my awareness." Bobbie also indicated, "I think in the curriculum, I [will] try to expand on what I had covered in the past. And in the daily routine of the classroom, I am more likely to address [homophobic behavior] rather than ignore it." A high school administrator also described a change in his thinking, "People introducing themselves with [their pronouns] was new thinking for me. And it has definitely impacted my thinking, and I'm definitely more aware."

Jamie, Charlie, and Justice indicated teachers as integral parts of their school experiences. It is, therefore, crucial to consider the specific ways teachers and school policies impact their lives. Although harmful structures of homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity present in Boyton factor into this equation, individual actions, and non-actions are worthy of critical consideration. Based on the lived experiences of individuals in Boyton, I argue that moving away from solely blaming harmful structures as villains, and instead looking towards individual actions and non-actions might allow for a joining of forces that interrupt harmful structures.

Antivillainification and Staff Training

In addition to previous scholarship included within this work, this final chapter considered the work of van Kessel and Crowley (2017). They argue that when analyzing harmful structures (in this case, homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity), it is also essential to consider the everyday actions and non-actions of people (not just structures) in a rural space that contribute to participant lives. Citing van Kessel and Crowley, "villainification narratives—and the conceptualization of evil they promote—

do greater harm. By oversimplifying and over-individualizing certain types of 'evil,' villainification obscures our understanding of how we perpetuate evil through our daily action". (p. 429).

Summary

Within their narratives, Jamie, Charlie, and Justice authentically described their lived experiences with family, peers, and school staff. Their words reinforce the presence of harmful societal structures, but for the most part, their words detail everyday actions, reactions, and non-actions of individuals in their lives. Therefore, I argue that when analyzing the lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals, it is crucial to consider these descriptions and emotions. van Kessel and Crowley (2017) encourage a "sensibility of interconnected responsibility among members of a society instead of blaming one person for systemic harm or diffusing blame into an amorphous entity (e.g., "society") (p. 427). As stated earlier, I am aware that individual actions are due to the influence of harmful societal structures but dismantling them requires an acknowledgment that individual actions have the potential to change the day-to-day alongside society as it works to dismantle them.

I also argue that considering the lived experiences of individuals in a rural school through a spatial/social justice/feminist lens might foster social change. Employing space and spatial justice theories indicates how the spatial construction of Boyton impacts LGBTQ individuals and, therefore, considers ways in which this space might be reconfigured. Finally, employing a feminist frame allows for ways in which the joining of forces between LGBTQ individuals with family, peers, and school staff may contribute to

significant change. Harmful societal structures play a role, but individuals provide the necessary enactment for those structures to exist and desist.

Discussion

Relevance to Social Studies Education

Social education scholars often investigate pedagogical and curricular practices that might successfully prepare students to become engaged participatory citizens. A critical descriptor of participatory citizenship includes individual understandings "that certain rights are inalienable, and that affirming those rights to the minority strengthens the democracy" (Avery, 2003, p. 195). Avery also suggested that schools (and social studies curriculum) address inclusion and acceptance instead of intolerance. Essentially, schools have one of the first opportunities in the public experience of a child's life to set expectations that encourage "kindness and tolerance and the disposition and skills to dialogue across difference" (Parker, 2003, p. xviii).

Social studies aims intend to foster inclusive democratic citizenry and have identified curricular inclusion as one of its more critical efforts towards this goal. More specifically, social education scholars have acknowledged their curricular responsibility. Crocco (2002) argued,

> dealing with issues of sexuality in the social studies should be a moral imperative for the field, with attention paid by social studies educators to the myriad dimensions of the subject within the context of school and teacher education curriculum. (p. 219)

Social education scholars have also indicated that an inclusive curriculum is not sufficient in these efforts. Schmidt (2010) argued that a dismantling of harmful societal

structures of heteronormativity is essential and is needed alongside curricular inclusion. I argue (and agree with Schmidt) that inclusive curriculum alone may not dismantle heteronormative structures but may be a critical component in moving towards a more socially just and accepting space. Jamie, Charlie, and Justice's teachers in their choices and everyday actions and non-actions have it in their power to accomplish this, however, most are not making that choice.

Jamie, Charlie, and Justice indicated their teachers were "trying," but inclusive efforts often cause them great harm (homophobic comments and pushbacks). In addition, all three referenced their English teachers as individuals who are working hard to include LGBTQ curriculum—not social studies. Reasons for this might be structural (i.e., standards-based instruction or heteronormativity). However, if English teachers (who are also guided by state standards) are trying, why are their colleagues not making that same effort? Do individual actions and non-actions (social studies teachers in Boyton) play a more significant role in exclusion than structures? Might efforts towards better staff training allow for teacher "know-how" and their ability to provide much needed inclusive curriculum. Bobbie, who is a social studies teacher at Boyton, indicated about staff training, "I think in the curriculum, I [will] try to expand on what I had covered in the past. And in the daily routine of the classroom, I am more likely to address [homophobic behavior] rather than ignore it."

Antivillainification and Social Studies

Throughout chapter seven, I argued that solely blaming harmful societal structures is detrimental. Instead, researchers and scholars should consider the everyday

actions and non-actions of individuals in the rural school space, as their role can be equally detrimental. van Kessel and Crowley (2017) suggest,

> villainification narratives—and the conceptualization of evil they promote—do greater harm. By oversimplifying and over-individualizing certain types of "evil," villainification obscures our understanding of how we perpetuate evil through our daily actions…There is a need to examine the broader system in play, but such an examination needs to be done without absolving those who comprise this system of their responsibility, regardless of whether they are aware of their complicity. The task of antivillainification, in part, removes our false sense of comfort that evil is other, and not "us," and calls upon us to engage with a more complete analysis of historical actors and contingencies, with an emphasis on the personal implications. (p. 429)

In addition, practicing teachers might consider exposing their students to an antivillainification framework, thereby allowing students to consider the idea that historical events such as the holocaust were not carried out by one villain or structure (i.e., Hitler and anti-Semitism), but by individuals that contributed to and allowed for the enactment of these injustices (van Kessel & Crowley, 2017). If students are allowed to consider this information in their studies, they might possibly transfer these notions into their own lives. My conclusions in this section may not apply to greater social education scholarship. However, based on participants' lived experiences in this work, antivillainification efforts in both research and classroom instruction deserve considerable attention.

Limitations

This study has five significant limitations. First, the participant sample size is relatively small and does not represent the larger LGBTQ population in rural spaces. Second, Jamie, Charlie, and Justice are all GSA members, and membership in this group may provide a different perspective from their LGBTQ peers who are not members. Third, my position as a teacher in this school may allow a greater contextual insider familiarity and understanding of participants; however, my role as their teacher may influence participant answers (Mishler, 1986). Specifically, sharing painful memories with their teacher might feel unnatural and uncomfortable, as the authority of my role as their teacher may negate their comfort. My role as their teacher may influence them to minimize painful experiences due to my possible contributions to those experiences. Participants may say things to make me feel less guilty about the structures I may have contributed to for 27 years and were trying to speak accordingly. Collins, Shattell, and Thomas (2005) suggest, "An informant may even make an effort to speak the interviewer's 'language'. . . rather than his or her own" (p. 190). Fourth, I based my argument surrounding antivillainification (van Kessel & Crowley, 2017) on participants in this study and their lived experiences. Therefore, I acknowledge that this argument may not apply to the greater LGBTQ community. I also recognize that research cannot minimize the harmful structures of homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity. However, in this context and this rural space, everyday actions and non-actions of family members, peers, teachers, and administrators are substantial contributors to Jamie, Charlie, and Justice's lived experiences.

Finally, my argument surrounding antivillainification and its insistence on considering individual actions and non-actions versus solely blaming the harmful

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structures of homophobia, heteronormativity, and transphobia leaves this work vulnerable to the "one bad apple" argument. However, Jamie, Charlie, and Justice's lived experiences in this rural school indicate that the individual actions of family members, peers, and teachers are incredibly impactful.

More specifically, Jamie, Charlie, and Justice described that family members, peers, and teachers often provide support, including acceptance and curricular inclusion. However, they typically followed up those descriptions with ways in which many individuals were also a source of harm. Whether it be ignoring homophobic and transphobic bullying, deadnaming or misgendering, tearing down allyship and GSA signs, posting homophobic material on social media, or nonacceptance and avoidance of sexual orientation or gender identity, as well as the absence of the LGBTQ existence in the school and curriculum.

Even though the above actions could be considered one good, or one bad apple, these individual actions can influence the larger group. In many cases, unfortunately, the bad apples get more followers. Kerr, Rumble, Park, Ouwerkerk, Parks, Gallucci, and van Lange (2009) argue, "the example of a few uncooperative group members ("bad apples") is more influential than the example of comparable numbers of cooperative members" (p. 603). Essentially, bad apples (or good apples) have the power to influence the rest, and instead of being singled out and dismissed, they can bring others with them. This information particularly alarming as "reports that participants were more inclined to follow the bad example of a single, relatively non-cooperative person (a bad apple) in a social dilemma than the good example of a single relatively cooperative person" (p. 604).

Therefore, individual actions must be considered and acknowledged as powerful forces in the world.

In addition, if society (and school spaces) dismiss harmful actions as merely "one bad apple," they support the inaccurate assumption those spaces are supportive (e.g., it is not the whole group, it is just "one bad apple"). These attitudes may open the door for people to adopt a mindset that they are not responsible and consider themselves innocent of these actions because they are not outwardly homophobic or transphobic. Shotwell (2016) described this phenomenon as purism or the false belief that individuals who are not outwardly harmful do not consider themselves part of the problem. Therefore, Shotwell stands against purity and argued that individuals might eradicate harm if they instead acknowledge responsibility. Citing Shotwell, "People are not equally responsible or capable and are not equally called to respond. But however, the bonds of "we" are drawn, we are not ever pure. We are complicit, implicated and tied to the thing we abjure" (p. 7).

Shotwell (2016) also argued "against purity" by suggesting that when individuals consider themselves pure, they lose the ability for significant change. Reinforcing this argument with feminist theory, Shotwell indicated that individuals who recognized their culpability (instead of considering themselves pure) might unite in ways that allow for a reimagined world. Essentially, individuals who accept their responsibility in the world might join with others to create a "solidarity based on collaborative conceptions of a world that does not yet exist" (Shotwell, 2016, p. 12).

In all, Jamie, Charlie, and Justice's lived experiences in this rural school may result from heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia; however, their words more

powerfully implicate individuals. Their lived experiences may not apply to the broader

LGBTQ population, but in this rural space with its unique spatial construction, individual

actions and nonactions are significantly impactful. Therefore, naming and recognizing

individuals as potential villains is essential. As individuals, we are not pure, we are all

complicit, and by accepting our responsibility and impurities, we stand to make

significant change. Citing Shotwell (2016),

> To invoke the foundational "no" of being against purity means that when we talk
>
> about impurity, implication, and compromise we are also foregrounding the fact
>
> that we are not all equally implicated in the responsible for the reprehensible state
>
> of the world. But whenever we stand in relation to the world, we can scream
>
> "no!" and open the space for many yesses. And further, to say we live in an unjust
>
> world is to hold a clear recognition that there are people who gain immense power
>
> and profit from this situation—and in real ways the people who benefit from the
>
> lie of purism are the ones who reiterate it. (p. 19)

Future Research

Overall, the findings in this dissertation may serve to impact future work. Mishler

(1996) suggested that "a preliminary study and the model which grew from it is still in

the exploratory stage, further work can, and should, be done to extend it into a larger

range of population" (p. 29). High-quality research in rural communities and schools is

lacking; it often has a too-narrow focus and is often location-specific; thereby, removing

the option to replicate or expand findings (Arnold et al., 2005). Therefore, future work

surrounding homophobia, transphobia, heteronormativity, and antivillainification in rural

schools might benefit from an extended sample area and size. Each rural space is unique; therefore, rural research should consider employing spatial theory.

Based on adult participants' lived experiences in this work, future studies should also include LGBTQ professional development for school staff. By insisting on this training, school staff can no longer continue under what Shotwell (2016) referenced as an ignorance epistemology. Citing Shotwell, "Ignorance is not just the absence of knowledge; it is a way to (not) know things" (p. 37). She continued, "One way to understand what is at play here is through imagining a kind of benign ignorance—people just haven't been taught the facts of the situation, and so they can't be held responsible for not understanding" (p. 38).

Empirical research surrounding professional development in rural schools may also benefit teacher education programs. If practicing teachers are trained and can implement what they have learned, teacher educators might add those essential practices in teacher education programs. Ross, Adams, Bondy, Dana, Dodman, and Swain (2011) argue, improving teacher quality is a multifaceted problem requiring attention to…professional development that increases the skills of inservice teachers" (p. 1213). Because many preservice teachers will find themselves teaching in rural areas, they would benefit from pedagogical methods successfully implemented by practicing rural teachers. Citing Ross et al., "all teachers have the capacity to lead their schools [and future teachers] down a more positive path, to enlist their abundant experience and craft knowledge in the service of school improvement" (p. 1213).

In all, future work surrounding LGBTQ lived experiences in rural spaces and schools is essential. To that end, scholars such as Hasting and Hoover-Thompson (2011)

and Nagoshi et al. (2008) have advocated for increased research in rural areas. Extensive

research might allow for more thoughtful comparisons and better understandings of

LGBTQ individuals' experiences in rural spaces, and it serves to produce better support

systems for all LGBTQ youth.

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Appendix A

Number of Student Participants

This dissertation originally began with four individuals who identified as transgender. During my analysis and writing process, however, one individual decided he would rather not participate. Therefore, data included in the character of Justice is based on interview data from three individuals.

Appendix B

Interview Protocol: Members of GSA

1. Tell me about yourself. What are your interests? How did you come to live in Boyton? What are some things I should know about you?

2. Tell me about your family.

3. Have you come out? In what spaces have you come out?

4. Tell me about your average day. How might someone understand what it is like walking in your shoes?

5. Tell me about your experiences throughout school? What stands out most in your mind?

6. What role has school played in your life? What do you wish other adults or peers knew about your school life?

7. Tell me about supportive places at school.

8. Tell me about difficult spaces at school.

9. Tell me about your absolute favorite place in school? Is there anywhere you spend the majority of your time?

10. Tell me about your relationships with your peers.

11. Tell me about the things you value most at this school.

12. Tell me about the things you value most in your community.

13. Tell me about the things that are difficult in your community.

14. Do you ever see yourself in the school? Do you see representations of LGBTQ individuals and their allies? Where do you see those things?

15. Where do you see yourself going in the future? Is there a future here in Boyton? Are you compelled to move somewhere else?

16. Is there anything else you want to tell me?

17. What questions might you have for me? If you have any other thoughts after we complete this interview you can email them to me.

Appendix C

Interview Protocol: Non-GSA Members

1. Tell me about yourself.

2. Tell me about your family.

3. Tell me about your experiences throughout school? What stands out most in your mind?

4. What role has school played in your life? What do you wish other adults or peers knew about your school life?

5. Tell me about your relationships with your peers.

6. Tell me about the things you value most at this school.

7. Tell me about your thoughts and feelings about the GSA over time? Have they stayed the same? Have they changed?

8. Tell me about why you took down the GSA sign.

9. How do you feel when you see the GSA signs?

10. Is there anything else you want to tell me?

11. What questions might you have for me? If you have any other thoughts after we complete this interview you can email them to me.

Appendix D

Interview Protocol: Teacher who Reported GSA Signs Torn Down

1. Tell me about yourself? How did you come to teaching? How did you come to Boyton?

2. Tell me about your family.

3. Tell me about the day(s) your students took down the GSA signs.

4. Tell me about your interactions with students after the signs were torn down.

5. Tell me about any subsequent interactions with these students.

6. Is there anything else you want to tell me?

7. What questions might you have for me? If you have any other thoughts after we complete this interview you can email them to me.

Appendix E

Interview Protocol: Participants of LGBTQ Professional Development

1. Tell me about yourself. How did you come to education? How did you come to Boyton?

2. Tell me about your family. Where did you grow up? Live now?

3. Tell me about your experiences as a teacher/administrator in this school. What stands out most?

4. What do you value most at this school?

5. Tell me about the LGBTQ professional development you recently participated in. How has this training impacted your thinking?

6. Is there anything else you want to tell me?

7. What questions might you have for me? If you have any thoughts after we complete this interview you can email them to me.

Appendix F

Interview Protocol: GSA Advisor

1. Tell me about yourself.

2. Tell me about your experiences as a teacher at Boyton.

3. What do you value most at this school?

4. What about Boyton do you wish was different?

5. Tell me about the GSA. How did you come to be its advisor?

6. Tell me about your experiences with the GSA since it was formed.

7. Tell me about your future goals for the GSA.

8. Is there anything else you want to tell me?

9. What questions might you have for me? If you have any thoughts after we complete this interview you can email them to me.