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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a year-long qualitative exploration of the experiences and perspectives of classroom teachers who identify as “allies” or “supporters” for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) public school students. Nine teachers representing five secondary schools in Central New York participated in three semi-structured interviews and approximately fifteen hours of classroom observation. Questions driving this research focused on (1) how teacher allies make meaning of LGBTQ students’ needs and their roles in addressing those needs; (2) how participants integrate “ally” work into the larger context of their professional practice; and (3) participants’ management of stigma or resistance around their “ally” work. Findings illuminate how educators engage in the work of supporting LGBTQ students without directly speaking about or acknowledging how gender and sexuality are relevant to experiences of teaching and learning. Educators instead framed the needs of LGBTQ students and the possibilities for improving their school experiences within broader frameworks of *supporting diversity*, *teaching tolerance*, *safe schools*, and *anti-bullying*. It will be argued that these frameworks provide rhetorical and instructional tools for talking about and implementing strategies that aim to encompass the needs of “all students” but do not require educators to consider how or why heterosexual, gender conforming identities are privileged and LGBTQ identities are marginalized in school environments.

TEACHER ALLIES: AN EXPLORATION OF THE PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES OF  
TEACHERS WHO SUPPORT LGBTQ STUDENTS

by  
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Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Foundations of Education

Syracuse University  
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This dissertation would not have been possible without the nine teachers who volunteered to share their classrooms and their stories. Throughout this process, I have said over and over again that I was incredibly lucky to find such intelligent, compassionate, creative, and brave educators, and I was continuously inspired by their teaching and their stories. The work they do to support LGBTQ youth is important and necessary, and it gives me hope that there are possibilities for pushing this kind of work further and addressing the cultural roots of LGBTQ exclusion in K-12 schools.

The support and guidance of my dissertation committee were invaluable as I completed the research and writing process. Elizabeth Payne took me under her wing early in my PhD program, and she has taught me how to be a researcher and how to look for possibilities to use research to make schools better places for LGBTQ youth, their educators, and their families. Her mentorship and friendship have helped me find my confidence as a scholar and to recognize my potential to make change in the world. Jerry Mager and Beth Ferri asked me questions and provided feedback that pushed me to be clear, precise, and confident in my analysis and critique, and their perspectives helped me think about my data in more complicated ways. Additionally, experiences in both of their classes pushed my development as a writer and as a teacher.

When I travel to conferences and talk to other PhD candidates who are doing research in the field of LGBTQ Issues in Education, I hear stories about the multiple ways that educational research on gender and sexuality is stigmatized and silenced, and many have experienced institutional pressure to abandon their work. That has *never* been my experience at Syracuse University, and I am profoundly grateful for the support I have received from the College and the faculty. Doug Biklen's support for the Reduction of Stigma in Schools program and the Queering Education Research Institute made it possible for me to learn how to be a publicly engaged scholar who specializes in LGBTQ issues, to gain experience working in schools to help them be more inclusive for LGBTQ students, and to engage in research projects that develop my skills and knowledge leading up to my dissertation. The faculty in Cultural Foundations of Education has been supportive and enthusiastic about my work from the beginning. Sari Biklen pushed me to develop my skills as a qualitative researcher and encouraged me to pursue a specialty in LGBTQ issues. Barbara Applebaum's course on Critical Whiteness Studies complicated my thinking about ally identity and ally practice, and I have often returned to notes

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Acknowledgements.....iv

Chapter 1: Introduction.....1

Chapter 2: Literature Review.....13

Chapter 3: Research Design.....60

Chapter 4: Teacher Ally Identity.....86

Chapter 5: Ally Pedagogy.....126

Chapter 6: Heteronormative Gender Roles in Teacher Allies’ Classrooms.....168

Chapter 7: Conclusion.....217

Appendices.....230

References.....236

Curriculum Vita.....255

## Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Currently, the social and political climate for research, advocacy, and education focused on the goal of creating more inclusive schools for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ)<sup>1</sup> students is being shaped by shocking stories about victimization and tragedy. The issue of LGBTQ suicide, bullying and harassment in K-12 school contexts has drawn increasingly intense scrutiny in recent years. As the 2010-2011 academic year began, the national media was filled with stories about LGBTQ youth who had committed suicide after being targeted by their peers with homophobic harassment. Within a three-week period, five male youth<sup>2</sup> ended their own lives, and each of them reportedly had been targeted for failing to conform to cultural expectations for normative masculinity. Similar stories of “bullycides”<sup>3</sup> have continued to circulate and highlight the possibly deadly effects of persistent bullying or harassment and raising questions about educators’ responsibility to prevent such tragedies from occurring. Notably, the story of nine suicides within two years in the Anoka Hennepin (Minnesota) School District drew national attention in 2011 and 2012 when parents claimed that the school district’s “Don’t Say Gay”<sup>4</sup> policy had silenced teachers’ bullying interventions and made educators afraid to take any action that could be interpreted as support for their LGBTQ students. These events have proven significant to the overall project of improving school experiences of LGBTQ youth because they increased educators’ and policy makers’ awareness about the prevalence and seriousness of peer-to-peer aggression targeting “different” gender and

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<sup>1</sup> The acronym “LGBTQ” is used throughout this dissertation to represent students whose sexual orientations, gender identities, or gender expressions do not align with heteronormative social norms. In particular, the “Q” is intended to represent youth who either identify as queer or questioning or whose identities do not fit neatly into the categories of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. In contexts where participants or cited scholars do not acknowledge the possibility of “queer” identities, the Q has been removed from the acronym.

<sup>2</sup> The 5 victims: Billy Lucas (September 9, 2010); Asher Brown (September 10, 2010); Tyler Clementi (September 22, 2010); Seth Walsh (September 28, 2010); Raymond Chase (September 29, 2010)

<sup>3</sup> *Bullycides* is a term the media has applied to suicides that have been linked to experiences of bullying.

<sup>4</sup> “Don’t Say Gay” policy is the colloquial term for schools’ “neutrality” policies that require teachers to avoid speaking about any topics that could be interpreted as political or controversial.



sexual identities.

The authoritative voice of the Obama administration has played a significant role in shaping the national conversation about the connection between bullying and LGBTQ youth suicide. In August 2010, The Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools hosted the first annual federal Anti-Bullying Summit. The summit served as a platform for launching StopBullying.gov—a web-based resource for anti-bullying information. Researchers specializing in youth violence and aggression were invited to speak to the nature of bullying behavior and possibilities for effective interventions. The research presented by the invited experts represents an understanding of bullying focused on anti-social behavior and the environmental factors that are correlated with such behaviors (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Swearer, Espelaga, Vallaincourt, & Hymel, 2010). On October 26, 2010, the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights released a “Dear Colleague Letter”<sup>5</sup> to school districts that reminded educators “that some student misconduct that falls under a school’s anti-bullying policy also may trigger responsibilities under one or more of the federal antidiscrimination laws enforced by the Department’s Office for Civil Rights” (OCR, 2010). In other words, bullying should not be understood only as an issue of anti-social behavior, intolerant attitudes, or lack of empathy—but also as a possible violation to targeted students’ civil rights. In April 2011, another “Dear Colleague” letter outlined schools’ responsibilities for addressing and preventing all forms of sexual violence and sexual harassment. The Obama Administration specifically emphasized the need to address LGBT students’ susceptibility to in-school violence through the Department of Education’s “Creating and Maintaining Safe and Supportive Environments for LGBT Youth” summit in June 2011. Education Secretary Arne Duncan also released a third “Dear Colleague

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<sup>5</sup> The October 2010 “Dear Colleague” letter was written to address all forms of bullying and harassment. However, it was released just weeks after a rash of highly publicized LGBT youth suicides—all of which were attributed (by the media) to the grave effects of in-school victimization.

Letter” articulating the Obama administration’s support for establishing Gay Straight Alliances<sup>6</sup> in schools and reminding school districts of the Equal Access Act’s<sup>7</sup> provisions for the recognition of student groups in schools. Most recently, the OCR distributed “Questions and Answers of Title IX and Sexual Violence” in an effort to clarify and provide additional guidance to the April 2011 letter. This letter included clarification about transgender students’ protections under Title IX—all students, regardless of actual or perceived gender identity are to be protected from sexual assault and harassment. Over time, these actions have established and clarified the Department of Education’s position on sexual and gender-based violence, and they have communicated expectations for prevention and intervention to school districts.

This federal action addressing the problem of LGBTQ harassment in K-12 schools contributes to the cultural context of this dissertation research. Data collection occurred in 2011-2012 academic year—a historical moment when LGBTQ students and their educational experiences were receiving unprecedented attention and scrutiny. The cultural context around bullying, harassment and LGBTQ students’ school experiences in New York reflects national trends, but two events were of particular concern during data collection. The first was the impending implementation of the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA), which was passed by the State Senate in June 2010 and went into effect in July 2012. This is anti-harassment legislation that includes sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression in its protected categories, and it establishes the expectation that schools will take action in the interest of investigating and intervening when violence occurs, preventing bullying and harassment and

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<sup>6</sup> A Gay Straight Alliance is a student organization that aims to provide support and affirmation to LGBTQ student and their allies

<sup>7</sup> The July 2010 “Dear Colleague” letter describes the requirements of the Equal Access Act as follows: “The Act requires public secondary schools to treat all student-initiated groups equally, regardless of the religious, political, philosophical, or other subject matters discussed at their meetings. Its protections apply to groups that address issues relating to LGBT students and matters involving sexual orientation and gender identity, just as they apply to religious and other student groups.”

creating positive climates. A statewide task force was designing regulations and implementation procedures during the 2011-2012 academic year, but school districts were anxious to learn how the state was specifically defining their responsibilities, how they would be held accountable, and how to effectively implement the new regulations in a budget crisis. Throughout the research, participants talked about information they had received from their administrators and questions they had about their personal responsibilities under DASA. Second, in September 2011 an openly gay high school student committed suicide in western New York—another target of alleged harassment due to sexual orientation and gender expression. In light of this tragedy, schools, politicians and the public at-large were impatient for DASA implementation, as the legislation was symbolic of the states’ policy makers’ and educators’ commitment to making schools safer for all students. Participants were particularly eager for the guidance and education that was promised to accompany DASA implementation because they were concerned with doing the “right” thing for their students.

These events are indicative of the current social and political discourses shaping the taken-for-granted definition of the problem of violence against LGBTQ youth. Each creates images of LGBTQ youth as vulnerable “others” who are in need of empathy and protection. The media attention paid to LGBTQ youth suicide has placed a spotlight on the urgency and severity of the victimization of these youth and created widespread motivation for action. Schools quickly became the focal point in the debate over what to *do* as they are the social sites where youth gather every day and are the “primary institution for identity formation, development, and solidification for contemporary American youth” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 18). Political leaders and LGBTQ advocacy groups (i.e. Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network and Human Rights Campaign) came forward with demands for state and federal laws to protect students who might

experience such harassment and for schools to implement school-wide anti-bullying and pro-tolerance programs, as well as *Safe Space*<sup>8</sup> and Ally development<sup>9</sup> programs. These demands closely aligned (and were often in collaboration) with federal and state political action. In total, these voices have established a course of action for supporting LGBTQ youth: eliminate violence and intolerance from schools. Anti-discrimination and anti-harassment laws are being called on “in the name of greater tolerance” (Brown, 2006, p. 12)—reminding schools that *difference* must have its place in the school environment.

Despite a cultural belief that schools should be welcoming of diverse identities, abilities and expressions, the question remains: what does it mean to be inclusive of differences? Such school environments are undoubtedly violence-free—and eliminating violence directed at LGBTQ kids is a necessary act of care—but to narrowly define the work of supporting or affirming these students in terms of anti-violence, acceptance or tolerance is a form of depoliticization which reduces “historically induced suffering...to ‘difference’ or a medium of ‘offense’” and replaces “a justice project...with a therapeutic or behavioral one” (Brown, 2006, p. 16). Policies and practice are being designed to address behaviors and attitudes, not systems of marginalization. In short, the heightened national awareness of LGBTQ harassment is both valuable and limited. Educational and political leaders are paying attention, but their course of action assumes that the *acts* of discrimination, intolerance and violence themselves are the problem, and success is equated with eliminating them and being tolerant of those who were targeted with discrimination. The cultural, systemic privileging of heterosexuality and gender normativity is not called into question in any meaningful way, resulting in “overly

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<sup>8</sup> *Safe Space* programs typically involve teachers using stickers to mark their classrooms as a harassment free zone for LGBT students and as a supportive space.

<sup>9</sup> Ally development programs are designed to develop heterosexual-identified individuals’ skills for supporting and advocating for the LGBT community. See Duhigg et al (2010); Edwards (2006); Getz & Kirkley (2003); Goldstein & Davis (2010); Ji et al (2009).

individualized and psychologized analyses that distort larger issues of inequality” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 17). In other words, educators and policy makers are in a pattern of questioning the attitudes and behaviors of bullies and harassers instead of questioning the countless ways LGBTQ and gender non-conforming youth are denied power in their schools.

Given the strength and prevalence of these messages about the safety and support of LGBTQ youth, it follows that educators’ responsibilities for supporting these students are being defined in terms of obligation to safety, anti-violence and anti-discrimination. Educators are being called on to provide “safe and supportive” learning environments for all students. However, educators often report fear and uncertainty around the work of supporting LGBTQ students, and many have doubts about students’, parents’, colleagues’ and administrators’ support for professional practice that confronts homophobia and heterosexism (Curran, Chiarolli, & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2009; Payne & Smith, 2011; Schmidt, Chang, Carolan-Silva, Lockhart, & Anagnostopoulos, 2012). Regardless, there are educators who have taken on support for LGBTQ students as part of their professional practice. This dissertation explores the experiences of educators who describe themselves as teachers who support LGBTQ students, gain deeper understanding of both the possibilities and limitations for affirming LGBTQ youths’ identities in school spaces, and develop implications for better preparing educators to disrupt the marginalization of LGBTQ youth.

### **Research Questions**

Overall, this dissertation examines how support for LGBTQ students is being taken up by heterosexual teachers and integrated into their teaching practice. Specifically it asks: How do heterosexual teachers come to claim the position of “ally” or “supporter” for LGBTQ students? How do participants interpret the needs of LGBTQ students and define their roles in meeting

those needs? What are participants' perspectives on the possibilities and limitations for "ally" action in their school contexts? How are participants' claims of "ally" or "supporter" visible in their classroom practice? Or not?

### **The Teacher Ally**

This study uses the term "teacher ally" to refer to heterosexual-identified teachers who specifically claim (1) their classrooms are school spaces where LGBTQ youth are safe and supported; (2) they recognize that homophobia exists in their schools and do their best to address it; and (3) they are aware of LGBTQ students' presence in the school environment—even though they may not personally know students who are "out" at school. This definition is informed by existing scholarship on social justice education and LGBTQ allies. Washington and Evans (1991) are credited with introducing the term *ally* in relation to advocacy for lesbian, gay and bisexual people and define the concept as: "A person who is a member of the 'dominant' or 'majority' group who works to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate with and for, oppressed populations" (p. 195). Similarly, Broido's (2000) widely cited study defines social justice allies as "members of dominant social groups...who are working to end the system of oppression that gives them greater privilege and power based on their social-group membership" (p. 3). Both discuss how experiences of social justice work are different for members of the dominant group than they are for those who are marginalized and how the effects of advocacy are different depending on the social location of the actor. *Ally* is constructed as an identity position one reaches through adequate education and motivation to apply new knowledge. Action is the external, social indicator of one's ally position, while awareness of heterosexual privilege is internal work that "begins to move the heterosexual from being a caring, liberal person...toward being an ally who begins to realize he

or she has a role in helping to make [equity and equality] realities” (Washington & Evans, 1991, p. 197).

Three academic fields have generated the majority of scholarship on LGBTQ allies: higher education, social movement theory and teacher education. Higher education literature addresses processes of “ally development” in the context of undergraduate student development (Duhigg, Rostosky, Gray, & Wimsatt, 2010; Edwards, 2006; Getz & Kirkley, 2003; Goldstein & Davis, 2010; Ji, Du Bois, & Finnessy, 2009). This literature draws attention to patterns in the experiences of those who identify as allies—they often have personal relationships with LGBTQ people, are committed to social justice principles and are seeking knowledge that will empower them to act as allies. It also acknowledges the possibility of allies experiencing fear or anxiety around others’ perceptions of their ally work or their own feelings of competence. Notably, higher education’s engagement with *ally* addresses the effectiveness of curricular tools for on-campus ally training programs, and these studies’ proposed models for stages of ally identity development are utilitarian approaches to designing programming that will engage a broad range of students in social justice work. Social movement scholarship engages issues of allies’ motivations for engaging in LGBTQ activism, their management of affiliation with an oppressed group, and the tensions between allies’ socially privileged positions and their actions toward dismantling said privilege (Myers, 2008; Russell, 2011). Finally, teacher education literature explores the idea of the *ally* in terms of professional practice, rather than phases of identity development or group membership. The “teacher ally” literature is focused on two primary issues: (1) pre-service teachers’ experiences and perspectives on new knowledge about heteronormativity and reflections on its applicability to their professional practice (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Clark, 2010; Vavrus, 2009); and (2) educators’ “taking up” of anti-oppressive,

LGBTQ-affirming pedagogical tools learned in professional development (Payne & Smith, 2010; Schneidewind & Cathers, 2003; Towery, 2007).

The scholarship generated by these three fields constructs an incomplete and somewhat disparate picture of who an ally *is*, how individuals come to claim an *ally* identity, make meaning of that identity, or attribute particular behaviors to an ally identity claim. This study will take up several issues introduced in the existing literature and pursue a more in-depth understanding of who teacher allies are; how they define their own roles, identities and responsibilities; the barriers they experience in their support of LGBTQ students; and the limitations of the concept of *ally* itself for advancing the disruption of heteronormative social structures. This dissertation aims to push beyond constructions of *ally* that (1) tie the ally identity claim to confidence and ability to take particular kinds of action or (2) presume the ally identity position is not “accomplished” until self-awareness of privilege has occurred and beliefs and action align (Broido, 2000; Edwards, 2006; Getz & Kirkley, 2003; Washington & Evans, 1991). Such developmental models imply there is an end-point to be reached where ally identity becomes salient or complete, and they fail to address the context in which ally identity is “developed” or the need for continual consciousness and evaluation of heterosexual privilege. This project will follow the lead of teacher education scholars who are beginning to engage in this more critical work by examining how teachers integrate new knowledge about systemic oppression into their professional identities and how this subsequently translates into “ally” action (Clark, 2010; Vavrus, 2009). It will also be informed by research indicating heteronormativity and heterosexism shape teachers’ interpretations of peer-to-peer violence and subsequent interventions (Anagnostopoulos, Buchanan, Pereira, & Lichty, 2009; Meyer, 2008). Further, this research seeks to address how stigma and risk play a factor in ally identity development. It



seems particularly important for teacher allies to pay close attention to how they're negotiating the stigma of advocating for LGBTQ youth, their privileged *straight* positions, and the professional risk of engaging in this work.

### **Description of the Study**

This study is a qualitative exploration of the experiences and perspectives of classroom teachers who identify as “allies” or “supporters” for LGBTQ students. The research methods were informed by critical qualitative research methods, which have the capacity to address questions of teacher experience and identity at the macro- *and* micro-sociological levels—by closely examining both the every day material reality of schools and “the role that schools play in the reproduction of inequitable social relations” (Youdell, 2004, p. 478). Nine female-identified, heterosexual-identified secondary teachers participated in three interviews and were observed multiple times throughout the 2011-2012 school year. The data collected represents glimpses into the complicated professional lives of the participants, their experiences working with LGBTQ students, and their perspectives on teacher support for LGBTQ youth in public secondary schools. Overall, findings illuminate how educators are engaging in the work of supporting LGBTQ students *without directly engaging with issues of gender and sexuality*. Instead, educators incorporated the needs of LGBTQ students into broader frameworks of *supporting diversity, teaching tolerance, safe schools and anti-bullying*. These frameworks provide rhetorical and instructional tools for talking about and implementing strategies that aim to encompass the needs of “all students” but do not require educators to consider how or why heterosexual, gender conforming identities are privileged and LGBTQ identities are marginalized in school environments. Even when participants were asked direct questions about gender and sexual diversity or LGBTQ students, they often responded with narratives about their

general concern for supporting student diversity. As a result, findings of this research are keenly focused on how heteronormative exclusions of gender and sexual orientation circulate through teacher allies' interviews and classroom practice.

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. Chapter One has outlined the national and state political context for research on teachers' support for LGBTQ students and defined the term *teacher ally*. Chapter Two will review the scholarship informing this study, which includes research shaping the United States bullying discourse, challenges to this discourse from the critical sociological perspective, sociological theorizations of teacher professional identity, and insights from Queer Theory and Critical Whiteness Studies that are useful for examining the privileged position of the straight teacher ally. Chapter Three will explicate the process and rationale for participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. Chapters Four, Five, and Six are organized to make the overall argument that self-identified teacher allies' professional narratives and professional practice are indicative of widely accepted educational practice that supports LGBTQ youth by helping them fit into existing institutional structures rather than seeking and reforming the reasons they are marginalized in the first place. These chapters were organized to facilitate examinations of the tensions between participants' visions of supporting LGBTQ youth and the power of heteronormativity. Chapter Four examines participants' professional identity narratives, which provide insight both to how educators define the work of supporting LGBTQ students and how they understand who LGBTQ students are within the broader context of a school population. Chapter Five explores the work that participants presented to exemplify the types of teaching practice that they believe addressed the needs of LGBTQ students, even though those teacher practices are not necessarily related to making gender or sexuality visible parts of the classroom experience. Chapter 6 focuses more

specifically on the heteronormative assumptions that shape teacher/student interactions. More specifically, this chapter will explore how traditional gender expectations shape teachers' interpretations of their students and shape their own professional experiences as they interact with students and assert authority in the classroom. The final chapter summarizes findings, discusses limitations, and proposes implications for teacher education, professional development, and education policy.

## Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The topic of straight teacher allies has gone almost totally unexplored in educational research. Therefore, this study is informed by bodies of literature that do not formally speak to each other, but when synthesized illustrate the academic and political context for this dissertation. First, this research is situated in the tension between (1) critical sociological education research on schools as heteronormative spaces; and (2) educational psychology research that explores questions about the relationships between victimization, school climate, and negative educational or psychological outcomes for LGBTQ youth. There are significant differences between how these bodies of research frame the project of making schools safer and more productive learning environments for LGBTQ youth. Bullying scholarship from the field of educational psychology focuses on the behavior and attitudes of individuals, individual-to-individual dynamics of aggression, and aims to identify environmental factors that may affect the frequency of aggression when they are manipulated (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Hymel, Schonert-Reichl, Bonanno, & Vallaincourt, 2010; Pellegrini et al., 2010). Critical sociology of education research assumes schools to be cultural sites that “play a part in structuring adolescent selves...including relations of power, labor, emotion, and symbolism” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 18). In contrast to the psychology literature’s quantitative approaches to understanding organizational outcomes (i.e. less homophobic language; fewer negative psychosocial effects), the critical sociology research illuminates how social stigma and marginalization work “in the most mundane moments everyday inside schools” (Youdell, 2006, p. 13), and these scholars believe that such knowledge is necessary for understanding how youth experience social marginalization. These psychological and sociological perspectives on LGBTQ harassment and

marginalization have different and significant implications for the roles and responsibilities of educators.

The second body of literature informing this dissertation is teacher identity literature focusing on the ways teachers understand themselves as social actors in the school context. This scholarship serves as a starting point for developing a framework for examining how participants integrate “ally” and “professional” identities, and it is useful for examining the tensions at the “interface between individual agency and subjectivity...and the hegemonic force of larger structures” (Liggett, 2011, p. 185) such as heteronormativity and hegemonic gender. Third, in the absence of meaningful critical engagement with transformative possibilities and limitations of straight-identified individuals advocating for marginalized groups, this research is informed by Critical Whiteness Studies’ analyses of the “race ally” identity claim. Finally, existing research on teachers’ engagement with LGBTQ issues will be reviewed. Synthesizing these bodies of research makes it possible to account for the strengths and limitations of the dominant discourse around the issue of LGBTQ students’ experiences, teachers’ negotiations of their own professional positions, and the complications of dominant groups members’ advocacy for marginalized groups.

### **Research on Bullying**

Since 2011, the Obama Administration has hosted White House summits on bullying and safe schools for LGBTQ youth, and in all cases they invited experts on LGBTQ bullying and harassment to define “the problem” and propose solutions. Notably, these experts represented a narrow point-of-view: all were educational psychologists who specialize in bullying behaviors, bullying roles, and characteristics of bullies and victims. This perspective on peer-to-peer aggression has been given a platform to educate the American public. Therefore, it is imperative

to examine how this scholarship defines the issue, what kinds of questions are being asked (and what kinds of data result from those questions), and the implications this research tradition carries for successfully addressing school-based aggression.

### **Climate versus Culture**

When bullying scholars describe the objective of their work, they often identify “positive school climate” as their goal. They survey individuals’ perceptions of the quality of the environment and analyze their data with the goal of identifying deficiencies or negativity. Interventions can then be designed to directly address these deficiencies—and later evaluated for their “impact” on the quality of the climate. However, *climate* is an enigmatic term in education research—both because it is operationalized inconsistently and its definition is often conflated with school *culture*. This is significant because interventions claiming to shift cultural norms in school environments are often utilizing school climate assessments to evaluate their success—thus conflating the two concepts (Anderson, 1982; Dessel, 2010; Hoy, 1990; Van Houtte, 2005; Welsh, 2000). According to Dessel (2010), climate is “the way school culture affects a child’s sense of safety and acceptance, and consequently is a critical determinant of their ability to focus on the task of learning” (p. 414). On the other hand, “culture encompasses the systems of knowledge and belief that are available within a given context for people to use to make meaning of their experiences” (Smith & Payne, in press), and “researchers concentrating on *culture* maintain that culture may offer a more profound insight into an organization, because ultimately climate is nothing more than ‘a surface manifestation of culture’” (Van Houtte, 2005, p. 78 citing Schein, 1990, p. 91). In other words, day-to-day policies and practices of a school are material manifestations of institutional and social norms and beliefs, and the norms and beliefs are the tools being utilized to, for example, determine which students are worthy of “fitting in” to the

school social scene and which students are not. Insistence on measuring climate places severe limitations on what research can tell us about how students and educators experience the quality of their school environments, which subsequently limits the possibilities for research-based intervention.

Research on climate intends to identify “the mediating variables between the structural features of the school and the outcomes for pupils and teachers” (Van Houtte, 2005, p. 71). Such research projects survey students and educators about their perceptions of how their schools measure up against normative standards for “good” schools such as school safety, clarity and fairness of rules, respect for students, student influence on school affairs, morale, and planning and action (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005; Welsh, 2000). School climate research also seeks correlations between frequency of student misbehavior (e.g. bullying) and school-level characteristics such as students’ perceptions of school attachment, school involvement, belief in school rules, association with positive peers, and parental school involvement (Stewart, 2003). These studies illustrate how “school climate is constructed as a measurable phenomenon that can be manipulated by adding new or modifying existing environmental factors” (Smith & Payne, in press). This method for research-based reform addresses policy, procedures and behavior, but the cultural meaning making systems are neither named nor disrupted.

Definitions of a positive climate differ across anti-bullying programs, but there is a consensus that peer-to-peer violence is a primary indicator that the climate needs to be improved—and that anti-bullying and climate improvement go hand-in-hand. Orpinas and Horne (2010) argue:

The fundamental component to reduce school bullying is to create a positive school climate that fosters caring behaviors....An organization's climate encompasses values, communication and management styles, rules and regulations, ethical practices, reinforcement of caring behaviors, support for academic excellence, and characteristics of the physical environment. A school with a positive climate is inviting, and students and teachers feel energized to perform at their best. (p. 49)

This statement sets a standard for schools and educators. Significantly, the authors emphasize the importance of behavior management as they call on schools to both notice and intervene when peer-to-peer aggression occurs and to teach students caring behaviors that are intended replace aggression. Students are to be taught the "right" thing to do, and consequences are designed for those who do not comply. Walton (2005) argues that such an approach is a natural result of conceptualizing "reduction [of bullying as] a measurable outcome" because understand bullying in this way "merely *contains, regulates, and manages* violence rather than *addresses* it" (p. 112). Furthermore, the role of educators is defined simplistically: their responsibility is to stop visible, overt violence and teach students to express kindness to one another. Rules are to be designed and enforced in support of these goals, and diligence around these tasks will result in a positive school climate.

### **The "Problem" of Bullying: The Educational Psychology Perspective.**

Research on bullying is reflective of educational psychology paradigms. Such projects ask questions about the *attitudes* and *behaviors* of bullies, *how* and *why* individuals engaged in bullying behaviors in the first place, and the negative psycho-social effects experienced by victims. Olweus (2010) has been conducting research on bullying since the 1970s, and he defines *bullying* as a specific type of aggressive behavior characterized by intent, repetition and



imbalance of power between bully and victim. This definition is widely used by bullying researchers (Frey, Hirschstein, Edstrom, & Snell, 2009; Smith & Brain, 2000; Swearer et al., 2010; Waasdorp, Pas, O'Brennan, & Bradshaw, 2011) and is often used to design survey instruments that assess climate and students' experiences with violence in school. As argued by Walton (2005), the definition being used in this research is important because it shapes the kinds of questions researchers ask and, subsequently, the kinds of "truth" about bullying being entered into the public discourse. He claims that this field's understanding of *power* is particularly significant because "power is conceptualized mostly as the capacity of an individual student for abusing another who is perceived by the bully as being weaker or deficient in some way" (p. 102). This dominant definition of bullying supports the cultural myth of the physically strong and intimidating child threatening a weaker, cowering peer. Research is, therefore, being designed in a way that supports assumptions about bullies and victims rather than trying to complicate them.

Much of the research on bullying aims to understand who bullies are and why they engage in aggressive behavior. Such research investigates factors in individual bullies' lives that led them to target their peers and frames these factors as "individual or family pathology" (Bansel, Davies, Laws, & Linnell, 2009, p. 59). Students who bully are believed to exhibit anti-social behavior (Alsaker & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2010), report low levels of empathy (Hymel et al., 2010), exhibit aggression to gain social status (Faris & Felmlee, 2011; Pellegrini et al., 2010; Vaillancourt, McDougall, Hymel, & Sunderani, 2010), and have been influenced by adults and other environmental factors that inadvertently supported the development of aggressive behavior (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Green, Dunn, Johnson, & Molnar, 2011; Johnson et al., 2011; Nickerson, Mele, & Osborne-Oliver, 2010). These research findings suggest that the roots

of bullies' aggression can be connected to negative life experiences or inadequate socialization around positive peer interaction, and interventions derived from such findings are often therapeutic in nature.

Research on bullying has attempted to offer alternatives to the common images of the bully, although these studies are still reliant on the assumption of strength acting over weakness. This research includes examinations of exclusion from social activities (Goldstein, Young & Boyd, 2008); bystanders' participation in bullying (Frey et al., 2009; Twemlow, Fonagy & Sacco, 2010); and the social purposes or advantages of bullying (Faris & Felmlee, 2011, Garandeau, Wilson, & Rodkin, 2010; Pellegrini et al., 2010). Researchers have also examined the prevalence of bullying in schools where it is considered "acceptable" versus schools where it is not (Gendron, Williams & Guerra, 2001; Waasdorp et al., 2011); and (binary) gender differences in experiences with bullying (Faris & Felmlee, 2011; Felix & Green, 2010; Garandeau, et al., 2010). These studies have made progress toward removing fault from individual "bad kids" who are aggressive and considering the ways peer cultures might reward bullying behavior. This shift puts blame on students' toxic social culture—which is seen as distinct from school culture—and calls for interventions that teach youth tolerance and civility.

### **Homophobia and LGBTQ Bullying**

Research on LGBTQ bullying—and the school-based interventions derived from its findings—communicate the message that high susceptibility to risk and peer-to-peer violence is the "totality of the lived experience of in-school marginalization for these youth" (Smith & Payne, in press). Many researchers exploring LGBTQ students' experiences with victimization aim to identify correlations between these experiences and negative academic and psycho-social effects. Rivers (2011) found that eighty-one percent of surveyed students who were targeted

because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation purposefully missed school “sometimes or often” (p. 100). Poteat and Espelage (2007) investigated the specific effects of homophobic victimization on middle school students’ experiences of anxiety, depression, distress and sense of school belonging. Birkett, Espelage and Koenig (2009) found that homophobic teasing raised youths’ risk for depression, suicidality, drug use, and truancy, regardless of sexual orientation—although questioning youth reported the highest levels of risk. Swearer, Turner, Givens, and Pollack’s (2008) research supported the hypothesis that boys who were bullied by being called “gay” would report more negative psycho-social outcomes than boys targeted for other reasons. Espelage, Aragon, Birkett and Koenig (2008) added the element of parental support to school experiences, and their findings indicated “students receiving support from parents and schools reported significantly less depression-suicidal feelings or less alcohol-marijuana use” (p. 213). Studies such as these are being used to establish “the problem” of LGBTQ students’ negative school experiences, and they are doing it in a way that constructs LGBTQ students as perpetually vulnerable in the school environment. By implication, educators are responsible for protecting them as part of providing a safe and supportive environment for all students.

Research on LGBTQ students’ school experiences have consistently indicated that these youth experience verbal harassment and social isolation in connection with their sexual orientation or gender identity (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2009; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2011; Rivers, 2011). Recently, scholars have pursued a more detailed understanding of the nature of homophobic harassment, and they have focused significant attention specifically to how and why heterosexual students are using homophobic language and relational aggression in the school environment. Poteat and Rivers (2010) investigated the connections between the “bullying role” aggressors take on (i.e. primary perpetration, bystander)

and their use of homophobic language. They found that “bullying and reinforcing the bully contributed additively to predict more frequent use of homophobic epithets” (p. 170) and proposed that homophobic language may be “perceived by aggressive students to be an effective way to achieve dominance or power over other students” (p. 171). Poteat, Espelage and Koenig (2009) explored heterosexual students’ willingness to remain friends with peers who self-identified as gay or lesbian in middle or high school. They found girls were more likely to remain friends with gay and lesbian peers than boys, but more importantly this study pointed to a need to think about LGBTQ students’ negative school experiences more broadly than simply in terms of bullying and harassment. Relational aggression can take many forms that may not fall within typical definitions of bullying—which assume acts of intimidation and persistent overt aggression. Horn (2007) also conducted research on heterosexual youth’s acceptance of their gay and lesbian peers, and her findings suggested that negative attitudes towards peers correlated more strongly with visibly gender non-conforming appearance than with sexual orientation. This finding raises questions about the role of gender conformity in heterosexual students’ decisions about which gay or lesbian peers to accept as friends or which peers are vulnerable to homophobic epithets.

The connection between bullying and climate is made explicit in research that aims to identify institutional and environmental factors that mediate or eliminate negative academic and psychosocial outcomes for LGBTQ youth. These research projects are where the conversation about “safe and supportive” schools is slightly expanded beyond bullying intervention to include social support mechanisms specifically designed to meet the needs of LGBTQ youth. The question being asked by this research is: what environmental factors mediate the level of harassment and/or its negative effects on LGBTQ students? Using data from a large-scale

statewide representative sample of high school students, Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer (2006) explored the relationship between the suicidality and victimization among sexual minority students and their perceptions about educator support, school programs (like support groups) and school characteristics (demographics, location). Students reported lower levels of risk if supportive staff and support groups were present, and those who attended schools that are stereotypically *less* safe (i.e. large urban schools) experienced less victimization. The authors suggest that the size and diversity of these schools allow sexual minority students to find a social niche, and they proposed the possibility that “school safety in general does not necessarily extend to safety for sexual minority students” (p. 584). This is one of many studies that aim to acknowledge the multiple environmental and institutional factors that could potentially impact LGBTQ youths’ school experiences: Gay-Straight Alliances (Goodenow et al., 2006; Szalacha, 2003), supportive educators (Birkett , Espelage & Koenig, 2009; Goodenow et al., 2006; Szalacha, 2003), anti-bullying policies (Goodenow et al., 2006; Szalacha, 2003), parental support (Espelage et al., 2008), and positive perceptions of school climate (Birkett et al., 2009; Espelage et al., 2008; Murdoch & Bolch, 2005; and Swearer et al., 2008).

In addition to anti-bullying programs, Gay-Straight Alliances, *Safe Space* programs, anti-harassment policies that name sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, and events such as the Day of Silence<sup>10</sup> are widely accepted steps toward giving LGBTQ students visibility and voice. However, these programs still reflect anti-bullying and safety frameworks and define LGBTQ students as victims who need protection and therapeutic intervention. Furthermore, these discourses are determining the criteria being used by educators to assess their schools’ overall level of support for LGBTQ kids (Smith & Payne, in press) and limiting the possibilities

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<sup>10</sup> Day of Silence is an annual, nation-wide event when U.S. students take a vow of silence to raise awareness about anti-LGBT harassment in schools.

for effective intervention to those that address bullying and its effects. Given the narrow scope of research findings produced by those who label themselves “bullying” researchers, it is important to look to other theoretical and methodological traditions to learn about how cultural norms and systemic oppression function in K-12 contexts. Macro-sociological examinations of how gender normativity and heteronormativity “work” in school environments are, therefore, critical for creating a complete, nuanced picture of the phenomenon of LGBTQ harassment.

### **Critical Qualitative Research on LGBTQ Marginalization and Harassment**

School climate and bullying research presumes schools to be neutral sites where all students have equal opportunity to succeed—and that barriers to success appear when individuals’ injurious behavior or attitudes infiltrate the school environment and create a “negative” school climate where students’ feelings of safety and belonging are threatened. In contrast, critical qualitative research on LGBTQ youth’s school experiences starts from the position that oppression exists in the school environment, and that the “precise nature of oppression...is an empirical question and not a given belief” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 8). This body of research uses a macro-sociological lens “to clarify how and where oppression works” (p. 8) and to shed “significant light on how and why apparently mundane and everyday practices inside school are so central to educational exclusions as they currently are, and to the possibility of interrupting these exclusions” (Youdell, 2006, p. 5). This worldview avoids the trap of “overly individualized and psychologized analyses that distort larger issues of inequality” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 17) because, instead of focusing on individual students’ characteristics, it is interested in how institutional constructions of “legitimate adolescence” (Eckert, 1994, p. 7) shape the possibilities for students’ participation in their school environments. In other words, moving the object of inquiry from the individual to the systemic level opens opportunities for

“examin[ing] how school processes act unwittingly to exclude particular students from the educational endeavour” (Youdell, 2006, p. 1).

### **Heteronormativity in K-12 Contexts**

Schools are built around a fundamental “truth” that sex, gender and sexuality align in accordance with heterosexual ideals. Binary gender is taken for granted—as is “opposite” sex desire—and students experience the pressures of normative gender throughout their schooling. Scholars interested in institutional heteronormativity examine how the “administration, regulation and reification of sex/gender boundaries [are] institutionalized through the interrelated social and discursive practices of staffroom, classroom and [social] group microcultures” (Mac an Ghail, 1994, p. 45). This research, therefore, offers deep insight to how heteronormativity functions, how hegemonic gender norms are being continuously reproduced, and how schools and educators are complicit (purposefully or not) in privileging heterosexual, gender conforming youth and marginalizing LGBTQ and gender non-conforming youth.

**Elementary schools.** Despite assumptions about the absence of sexuality in elementary schools, research indicates that these educational sites—and the children who spend time in them—are deeply entrenched in rigid cultural expectations as they are dictated by compulsory heterosexuality and hegemonic gender. Renold’s (2000, 2006) ethnographic research investigates how sexuality is present and how heteronormativity “works” in elementary school settings. She found that girls “were invested in the production of their bodies as heterosexually desirable commodities” (2000, p. 310), and they policed one another’s gender expressions around (hetero) gender norms that expect girls to perform for the pleasure of the opposite sex while still maintaining claims to innocence and propriety. Boys were anxious or ambivalent about heterosexual relationships but were subject to homophobic teasing if they did not perform as

“tough-guys,” “footballers,” or were not perceived to be “sporting competent” (2000, p. 320).

Significantly, framing boy-girl relationships outside the terms of heterosexual relationships was almost impossible (Renold, 2006). She argues that her findings are indicative of how

...children actively negotiate and are coerced by a ubiquitous hegemonic heterosexual matrix as they do and become gender/ed within institutional...and generational space...and a local and global culture that presumes, if not expects, gendered performances that are the straightest of the straight. (p. 491)

This research challenges cultural myths of “childhood innocence” that claim sexuality has no place in young children’s lives and schooling. Her insight to the day-to-day, in-school social interactions of young children creates a clear picture of how children’s social development is heavily influenced by heteronormative ideals.

Even when educators are actively engaged in the work of “understand[ing] the nature of heteronormativity as a cultural phenomenon” (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010, p. 1671) and disrupting the power of this cultural system through “queer” or anti-oppressive classroom practice, they remain subject to the pervasive regulatory power of heteronormativity. DePalma and Atkinson’s (2009, 2010) *No Outsiders* project was a long-term, participatory-action research project utilizing school/university partnerships to “add to the understanding of the operation of heteronormativity” and “develop means of challenging [it]” (2010, p. viii) in primary schools in the United Kingdom. The portion of their research specifically investigating educators’ classroom practice indicated that teachers often based professional decisions on heteronormative assumptions. Educators, while willing to respond to homophobic harassment, were predominantly unwilling to add LGBTQ content to their curriculum for fear of accusations that they are “promoting” homosexuality or teaching inappropriate content (2009). This curricular



silence, coupled with the invisibility of LGBTQ teachers and parents, is emblematic of “social processes that assume the absence of marginalised people” (2010, p. 1671). This systematic silencing produces similar effects to the “discourses and practices of homophobia, (hetero)sexism, and misogyny” discussed in Renold’s (2006) research: They “all operated to consolidate and maintain Butler’s hegemonic heterosexual matrix whereby gender (masculinity/femininity) and sexuality (heterosexuality/ homosexuality) are both hierarchically and oppositionally organised” (p. 499).

**Secondary schools.** Research in middle and high schools is a growing body of work that continues to build a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how heteronormativity creates possibilities for gender and sexuality-based aggression while limiting possibilities for identity expression, creativity, pedagogy and “intelligible” (Youdell, 2006) ways of *being* in a school. This more complicated insight has created possibilities for designing interventions that will address the *cultural production* of marginalization, rather than just the symptoms of it (i.e. bullying). Eckert (1994) and Pascoe (2007) are two scholars who illustrate the ways in which high schools institutionalize heterosexuality, define “ideal” students in accordance with normative gender and sexuality, and subsequently participate in the marginalization of students who do not conform to these norms. Eckert’s (1994) research on girls’ transition from preadolescence into the “heterosexual marketplace” draws attention to the limitations U.S. high schools have placed on “legitimate adolescence”: “enthusiastic participation in extracurricular activities, competent participation in curricular activities, lack of parenting or family responsibilities, lack of financial responsibility, non-coital heterosexual involvement” (p. 7). The message is that conforming to these expectations—and the adult versions that will follow—are commodities and will grant one access to higher social status. When adolescents enter high

school, they become subject to “an institutionalization of traditional gender arrangements, heterosexuality and romance” (p. 7). Heterosexuality and status are closely linked, although heterosexual activity must fall within standards of “appropriateness.” Pascoe’s (2007) research on masculinity in high school produced similar conclusions: “The heterosexualizing process organized by educational institutions cannot be separated from, and in fact is central to, the development of masculine identities” (p. 27). Her analysis of school rituals, pedagogical practices, disciplinary procedures, and student interactions indicated that high school “set[s] up formal and informal sexual practices that reflected definitions of masculinity and femininity as opposite, complementary, unequal, and heterosexual” (p. 27-8, using Butler, 1993). Boys gained social status through “appropriate” masculine performance in a context where the school simultaneously emphasized heterosexuality and exercised attempts to control sexual activity. Each of these studies illustrate how secondary schools embed heterosexuality into their implicit and explicit curriculum.

Collectively, critical qualitative research on heteronormativity and schooling makes a vital contribution: It has expanded the conversation beyond violence experienced by LGBTQ youth and drawn attention to the multiple ways (hetero)gender norms organize and regulate the lives of *all* youth and adults who occupy school spaces. It has exposed patterns in the social hierarchies of schools—gender conformity and “correct” heterosexuality earn visibility and prestige—and has offered insight to how students of all ages use gender norms as tools in their battles for social position. This body of work has also drawn attention to this field’s overwhelming focus on the experiences of White middle class and working class students. McCready (2003, 2009) is one of the few voices in educational research speaking to the need to examine the multiple, co-existing, and intersecting forms of stigma and oppression experienced

by LGBTQ youth of color. His research on the experiences of gay and gender non-conforming Black male students with Gay-Straight Alliances indicates that “although Black male students were marginalized, gay and gender non-conforming Black male students experienced a different kind of marginalization than their heterosexual, hyper-masculine peers” (p. 137). Further, he argues that these complicated intersections of race, gender and sexuality call for “multidimensional frameworks that take into account the complex ways race, class, gender, and sexuality contribute to the marginalization of Black gay and gender non-conforming students and, more generally, all queer students” (2003, p. 141). Future research is needed to work toward a deeper understanding of how heteronormativity organizes and regulates the lives and school spaces of youth in a wider variety of contexts and of youth who occupy a wider variety of social positions. But despite these limitations, the knowledge we *do* have about institutional heteronormativity serves as a back-drop to this dissertation research.

### **Educational Exclusions**

Schools are spaces where there are strict limitations to who one is allowed to “be”—and these limitations carry critical implications for understanding the phenomenon of LGBTQ bullying, harassment and marginalization. Youdell’s (2004, 2005, 2006) work illustrates the limitations of understanding “education as a tool for social inclusion” if it means identifying “at risk” students and designing interventions to keep them in school. Instead, educators and researchers should see inclusive education projects as “case[s] [of] identifying how educational exclusions are produced through the mundane and day-to-day processes and practices of educational institutions” (2006, p. 12-3). She argues that the “micro-exclusions that take place in the most mundane moments everyday inside schools...must be understood as constitutive of the student, constitutions whose cumulative effects coagulate to limit ‘who’ a student can be, or even

if s/he can be a student at all” (2006, p. 13). These limitations are relevant to questions about how educators construct the “ideal” student and respond to students who do not meet that standard, but they are also relevant to understanding how students police one another. The criteria students use to target one another are products of *and* reproduce cultural limitations on *normal* or *intelligible*. Youdell uses the metaphor of *constellation* to illustrate how “particular types of students and learners are constituted” (Youdell, 2006, p. 30; also Youdell, 2004). The constellation creates a visual image of how “discourses that constitute students as learners intersect with, indeed are infused with, multiple discourses of sex, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and social class” (2006, p. 100). In order for students to be intelligible subjects in school environments, they must “make sense” both *within* particular discourses (i.e. hegemonic gender), as well as “in terms of the *intersections across* those discourses” (2006, p. 100). For example, sex-gender-sexuality constellations place limits on feminine gender performance, making it hard to “see” lesbian identities in school environments (Youdell, 2004). This framework is useful for understanding the phenomenon of LGBTQ harassment and marginalization because it highlights the impossibility of queer youths’ full intelligibility in school environments—which “are permeated by enduring hetero-normative discourses that inscribe a linear relationship between sex, gender and (hetero-) sexuality within the ‘heterosexual matrix’” (Youdell, 2004, p. 253 using Butler, 1990).

**“Micro” and “normative” aggression.** Youdell makes an argument for educational scholars to see exclusion as *process* rather than *event*, and she calls for theorizations of student identities that will account for the complex circulations of discursive power which are placing severe limitations on intelligible ways of *being* in educational contexts. Other education scholars add to her work by illustrating the limitations of taken-for-granted understandings of bullying

and peer-to-peer aggression. For example, Solorzano, Ceja and Yosso's (2000) examination of racial microaggressions challenges the assumption that peer-to-peer aggression is visible.

Microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges—verbal and non-verbal—that send messages to certain individuals that because of their group membership, they have little worth. They affect the quality of life and standard of living for marginalized groups, and they create disparities in employment, health care and education. In the school environment, microaggressions are rarely noticed or addressed because these subtle events typically fail to create significant disruption: being ignored in conversation or excluded from social activities, behind-the-back gossip, or teacher avoidance of discussing LGBTQ topics in classrooms (Bortolin, 2010). Yet, the harm caused by microaggressions is “constant, continuing, and cumulative” (Sue, 2010, p. 52).

Ringrose and Renold (2010) are concerned with peer-to-peer aggression that is perceived to be a “normal” part of same-gender peer interactions but is actually an integral component of the processes of exclusion (Youdell, 2006). They introduce the term “normative cruelties” in reference to “the ways performing normative gender subject positions invoke exclusionary and injurious practices (for instance, being a physically violent boy, or a mean girl) that are taken for granted” (Ringrose & Renold, 2010, p. 575). They argue:

...such normative practices are obscured in the conceptual frameworks and discourses around bullying....Rather, what is identified as bullying...tends to be that which transgresses normative gendered behaviour as this ‘intersects’ with other identity markers like class and race. (p. 575)

In other words, some types of aggression are considered a “normal” part of childhood and adolescence, and some are not. Adolescent girl participants indicated that these “normal” aggressions were harmful, difficult to manage and placed limits on their expressions of self, but

bullying interventions offered by their schools did not give them appropriate tools to solve the problem because these interventions rely on defining “the bully” as a violent, pathological figure (Ringrose, 2008; Ringrose & Renold, 2010). Pre-adolescent boys reported similar problems, as capable management of “tough guy” banter is considered a normal part of childhood and adolescence. Any adult intervention presumed a bully and a victim—both of which are pathologized gender transgressions (Ringrose & Renold, 2010). This dissonance between youth experiences of peer-to-peer aggression and adult understandings of it severely limits the possibilities for effective intervention.

**Verbal targeting.** Youth engage in “continual, vocal branding of Other” (Thurlow, 2001, p. 26). This verbal targeting serves the purposes of positioning one another in the school’s social hierarchy and establishing norms for acceptable behavior and performances. The vocal targeting that occurs in schools is not simply indicative of interpersonal conflict. Youth are citing cultural norms and values and using them as criteria to police their peers’ ways of being in the school environment. As Rasmussen and Harwood (2003) explain, “pejorative language is invested with historical, social and cultural power...[T]he speaker’s words would be nonsensical in the absence of broader institutional structures that support the ongoing production of [inequality]” (p. 29).

Pejorative language works precisely because it cites cultural systems—such as hegemonic gender—already in place in the institution. When an individual is targeted with a label such as *sissy* or *faggot*, that person is classified, ostracized, and attributed a “social position within hierarchical structures” (McInnes & Couch, 2004, p. 435). Furthermore, “such a naming joins a citational chain” that draws upon “past articulations and perceptions” (Ngo, 2003, p. 116) and “inscribes hierarchical binary relations” between the subordinated identity and the identity

that is the “silent partner in the dichotomy” (Youdell, 2004, p. 481). This means that hate speech acts such as “fag,” “dyke,” or “slut” are directly injurious to the student who is targeted, but they also establish each of these identity positions within the social hierarchy of the school *against* their “opposite” such as “jock” or “good girl.” The targeted student is subordinated, and the aggressor creates separation from and status over the Other. The more these labels are used as weapons, the more solidly defined they are as identity positions to be avoided, thus strengthening the power of the social pejoratives. However, the object or intent of the hate speech act cannot be the sole concern because the effects reach beyond the moment of utterance. “The perpetual degradation of [‘gay’, ‘fag,’ ‘dyke’] as hate-words pollutes the social-psychological environment in which young bisexual, gay and lesbian people must live” (Thurlow, 2001, p. 26).

Critical qualitative scholars have also examined questions about how youth experience and make meaning of aggression in their everyday interactions with peers. Chambers, Tincknell, and Van Loon (2004) examined how and why students police one another’s behavior, and they found that “discourses of morality [were] mobilized by young people to describe their perceptions of their gendered and sexual subject positions and that of the opposite sex” (p. 397). They explored how their participants utilized and made meaning of “verbal sexual bullying,” and found boys engaged in homophobic bullying of each other and misogynistic bullying of girls. Girls were not as overtly aggressive, but their verbal bullying served the purpose of policing reputations. “Both forms of harassment drew on negative stereotyping, ranging from verbal teasing to physical harassment, creating a public conformity of values and spoken attitudes” (Chambers et al., 2004, p. 400). Thurlow (2001) investigated the types of pejoratives adolescents were using against one another and asked participants to explain which terms were considered the most harmful and why. He found that “homophobic references were strikingly represented in

young people's reports of abusive naming practices and yet clearly not regarded as being especially offensive" (p. 32). The participating boys were particularly "aware of how reputation-damaging [homophobic] pejoratives can be" (p. 35), but their concern was not a sign of respect for LGB people. On the contrary, "they fear being the recipient of such abuse precisely because they regard these people so poorly" (Thurlow, 2001, p. 35). Eliasson, Isaksson, and Leflamme's (2007) research aimed to "understand discursively how and why [14-15 year-old] girls and boys use verbal abuse in the school context" (p. 589). They found similar patterns as other research projects and they concluded that "verbal abuse is seen as a cultural resource for construction of gender identity" (p. 588) because it is a tool for "differentiating yourself from others" (p. 588). Collectively, these studies highlight the social advantages of participating in verbal aggression.

**Gender policing.** Youth police one another according to idealized gender norms—which cannot be separated from expressions of sexuality. For boys, peer-to-peer aggression is a mechanism for establishing one's position in institutions organized in support of hegemonic masculinity. "Fag" is perhaps the most commonly deployed weapon as boys fight for social positioning. In her ethnography of a suburban high school, Pascoe (2007) argued that "boys collectively battled a terrifying, destructive, and simultaneously powerful Other, while each boy was, at the same time, potentially vulnerable to being positioned as this Other" (p. 157). Smith (1998) named this constant circulation of homophobic language between boys the "ideology of 'fag.'" He argued that students employ a "set of rhetorical devices...that are used to define gender boundaries and produce 'fag' as an object" (p. 316). These devices "enforce heterosexuality by selecting particular characteristics as documenting an underlying pattern of homosexual identity. They have to be learned and remembered" (p. 317). Therefore, boys must regulate their own dress, speech, posture and mannerisms because any deviation from the



narrowly-defined hetero-masculine norm will be targeted with “fag.” Characteristics such as nerdy, overweight, artistically and academically talented, lack of athleticism, anything perceived to be weird, and too much or too little time spent with girls are subject to scrutiny (Bortolin, 2010; Chambers et al., 2004; Pascoe, 2007; Smith, 1998). Proper participation in the “fag” targeting itself is also an important expression of masculinity, as boys are expected to show an ability to withstand scrutiny and deflect the “fag” onto others (Eliasson et al., 2007). The social hierarchy that these processes produce place gay and gender non-conforming males at the lowest point possible because same-sex desire and overtly feminine gender performance are the most egregious violations of hegemonically masculine gender.

Girls’ gender policing works somewhat differently from boys’ because “‘dyke’ does not have the same resonance for girls as ‘fag’ does for boys” (Eliasson et al., 2007, p. 599, using Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Gender performance and sexuality are closely linked, so girls who are not perceived to be adequately feminine are subject to the ‘dyke’ label for both masculine gender performance and insufficient engagement in the heterosexual dating scene. However, when girls police one another’s hetero-gender performance, the standards predominantly concern propriety and morality around sexual activity (Eliasson et al., 2007; Ringrose, 2008), making “slut” the iconic pejorative in feminine gender policing (Payne, 2010). Through her interviews with twelve to fourteen-year-old girls, Ringrose (2008) found that “sexual regulation of self and other appears as one of the *only* legitimate means through which...girls could openly perform anger and hatred toward another girl,” and the aggression was framed through “codes of sexual propriety and respectability” (p. 515). Girls can establish themselves as moral authorities by calling upon the feminine ideal of the ‘good girl’—thus getting away with targeting and policing peers because they are preserving sexual propriety (Payne, 2010). This policing of femininity

and morality creates considerable barriers to accessing social status in the school environment. Popularity comes with being pretty, nice, and adopting traditional gender roles in relation to boys, and girls who do not conform are positioned as outsiders. So, while girls who are perceived to be too masculine are not consistently labeled as “dyke,” they are not recognized in a social scene that values traditional gender roles either (Payne, 2007). Shakib’s (2003) research on high school basketball players indicated that “playing sports like basketball ran counter to ideas about femininity required to acquire social status from peers” (p. 1410). Participants reported that as they got older the criteria for “doing” gender “right” became stricter, and they felt “more pressure to conform [to feminine ideals] after puberty because of implications for their sexual identities” (p. 1413). Participants in Payne’s (2007, 2009) research on adolescent lesbians’ school experiences reported feeling “disconnected” and “out of place” in school because “they attended less to the performance of a heteronormative femininity than their (presumably) heterosexual peers and seek recognition for their individuality, or personal accomplishments, rather than their relations with men” (2007, p. 61-2). Many of the participants in this study were not “out” at school, yet their failure to participate in the heterosexual dating scene—and bids for recognition in other arenas—rendered them “unintelligible” (Youdell, 2006) in their school environments.

### **Framing the “Teacher Ally”**

The tension between educational psychology research on bullying and qualitative research on heteronormative schools is significant for research on teacher allies. Research on LGBTQ bullying calls for “supportive” educators or “allies” in schools. However, the role of allies is defined in such a way that “ally” action will not disrupt the structures of school. In this body of literature, allies are those who intervene when they witness harassment or bias, provide a

classroom environment where students will not hear homophobic epithets, and create a classroom culture where all students feel accepted and welcome, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. LGBTQ students will be accepted or tolerated, but they will remain Other—in a subordinate social position and outside the parameters of heterosexual norms. The critical qualitative research implicitly challenges this construction of the supportive educator in its examinations of how “students are using gender norms as the primary tools for determining who ‘deserves’ to be targeted and who has the right to higher social status,” and in its descriptions of schools as “participants in both teaching youth to use these tools and privileging some groups of kids over others” (Smith & Payne, in press). Shifting “the problem” from student behavior and attitudes to structural power and institutional complicity expands educator responsibility to encompass the work of (1) recognizing the regulatory power of heteronormativity and hegemonic gender; (2) evaluating individual and institutional policies and practices that reproduce and reify this cultural power; and (3) disrupting these systems that privilege heterosexuality and gender conformity and marginalize those who do not live up to these norms.

The hegemonic power of the “bullying” discourse (Ringrose & Renold, 2010) makes this conceptualization of “teacher ally” and professional responsibility difficult to imagine because it so strictly defines problems of school safety and acceptance in terms of a dichotomous bully-victim dynamic. In this paradigm, teachers who stop overt aggression and bias are doing their jobs, but there is no attempt to identify and understand the cultural tools students use to police one another. Cultural norms that set the standard for who and what it is acceptable to be—like those shaping “normal” gender expression—are not included in conversations around stopping peer-to-peer aggression. In the event that “culture” *is* identified as part of the problem, it is considered unchangeable and outside the control of educators. This tension between two

constructions of the supportive educator—*protective* versus *disruptive*—raises questions about how educators make meaning of the work of improving school environments for LGBTQ kids; how they define their positions of *advocates*, *supporters*, or *allies*; how they position themselves in relation to colleagues and students; how they integrate “ally” work into their understandings of self as a professionals; and how cultural discourse shapes the expectations and possibilities for professional behavior. Such inquiry must be placed in the context of literature on teacher professional identity.

### **Teacher Professional Identity**

With few exceptions (Clark, 2010; Vavrus, 2009), educational research has not drawn connections between educators’ “ally” work or identity claims and teacher professional identity. Introducing the “ally” identity position to teacher identity scholarship creates opportunities to examine if and how educators integrate LGBTQ activism into their overall understanding of their professional selves. MacLure (1993) claims, “People use [identity] claims to *make sense* of themselves and their actions—to find order and consistency in the journey from past to present; to work out where they ‘stand’ in relation to others; to defend their attitudes and conduct” (p. 320). She and other teacher identity scholars are interested in how teachers understand, make meaning of and experience their professional selves. Watson (2006) argues, “The importance of the concept of professional identity lies in the assumption that who we think we are influences what we do, i.e. there is a link between professional identity and professional action” (p. 510). Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) claim, “Teacher identity...stands at the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of ‘how to be,’ ‘how to act,’ and ‘how to understand’ their work and their place in society” (p. 178 using Sachs, 2005, p. 15). In other words, *teacher identity* is believed to be an essential part of how educators

*exist* in their professional environments. Classroom management; instructional decisions; ways of interacting with students, parents and colleagues; beliefs about professional responsibility and organization of professional priorities can all be linked to the concept of *teacher identity* because each of these things “is framed by and constituted through [teachers’] understanding and positioning of themselves as a product of their professional identity” (Mockler, 2011, p. 517). Such thinking about who teachers are creates opportunities to examine what it means to be an ally in a school context beyond educators’ roles and responsibilities as they are defined by the bullying discourse.

### **Defining *Teacher Professional Identity***

Teacher education accreditation bodies—such as National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)—operationalize “teacher development” by identifying “knowledge, skills and professional dispositions” (NCATE, 2008) prospective teachers must meet or express in order to become “effective” or “good” teachers. Britzman (1992) argues that this practice in teacher education problematically defines teacher identity “as a non-contradictory and fixed essence” (p. 42), and that “the teacher’s identity is taken for granted...as an outcome of pedagogical skills, an aftermath of being there in the classroom, or as a function of experience” (p. 23). Further, this way of thinking “non-problematically scripts teacher identity as synonymous with the teacher’s role and function” (p. 23). Britzman (1992) is arguing that it is an error to equate development of *identity* with sufficient *competence* or *knowledge* to fill an institutionally-defined role. One can neither assume that acquiring a litany of skills will guarantee effective professional practice, nor that “the relationship between professional identity and practice is...a simple unidirectional one in which some essential core of self, a stable entity

comprising who we think we are, determines how we act in a given situation” (Watson, 2006, p. 525).

Teacher professional identity scholars have argued for understanding teacher identity as something that is fluid, multiple, negotiated and always evolving. Definitions of *teacher identity* in the empirical literature are inconsistent; however, several persistent characteristics have emerged. Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) claim that *teacher identity* materialized as an area of study in the 1990s, and their review of literature from this period indicates that *teacher identity* is understood to be dynamic (not stable or fixed), a product of interaction between person and context, composed of “sub-identities that more or less harmonize” (p. 122)—and they understand teachers as agents in the process of developing their professional identities.

Beauchamp and Thomas’ (2009) review of teacher identity literature identifies similar patterns, claiming there is an “apparently common perspective that identity can be represented in multiple ways and has a dynamic, shifting nature” (p. 178; see also Danielwicz, 2001; Mockler, 2011).

Alsup (2006) argues that teachers’ identity work is not solely an intellectual endeavor and requires “a view of...development that is holistic—inclusive of the intellectual, the corporeal, and the affective aspects of human selfhood” (p. 6). Furthermore, it is “a space of continual becoming rather than an endpoint culminating in a singular identity construction” (p. 7). Mockler (2011) defines developing professional identity as a

...“project”...of articulating and maintaining congruence between personal and professional values, moral purpose, and then ‘pushing through’ the border between moral purpose and “on the ground” action, to create congruence between these and the work of the teacher both inside and outside the classroom. (p. 524)

These similar definitions aim to account for the countless ways that individual educators may interact with their environments, make meaning of and apply things learned in teacher education, or experience the cultural systems that play a powerful role in who students and educators are allowed to be in the school environment.

**Teacher identity as a social phenomenon.** Researchers who argue against the assumed linearity of teacher development are seeking a theorization of teacher identity that counters the assumption that teacher identity is “an outcome of pedagogical skills, an aftermath of being there in the classroom, or as a function of experience” (Britzman, 1992, p. 23). To that end, Mead (1934) and Goffman’s (1969) social theories of identity are prevalent theoretical frameworks for scholars examining the social nature of teacher professional identity. Teacher professional identity research using Mead’s (1934) social identity theory examines how “a teacher’s identity is shaped and reshaped in interaction with others in a professional context” (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 178). Beijaard et al.’s (2004) exploration of “self-reflexivity” utilizes Mead’s distinction between *I* and *me* to interrogate “the self-reflexive identity work in which a teacher may engage” (p. 124) through the process of interpreting and reacting to one’s professional context. Akkerman and Meijer (2011) apply Mead’s concept of the “generalized other,” which represents the phenomenon of defining the self in dialogue with intuitive knowledge of social norms. They define identity as a “dialogical self” in which multiple I-positions (individual responses to external influence) interact with generalized others, and “communities can inform and play a substantive role in the development of I-positions by introducing particular ways of thinking, speaking and acting” (p. 312). *Identity* is the space where these I-positions negotiate with one another to establish a cohesive self.

Teacher identity projects utilizing Goffman's (1969) social identity theory are concerned with how identity is *performed*—"socialized', molded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented" (p. 35). Day, Kington, Stobart and Sammons (2006) conceptualize teacher identity in terms of Goffman's assertion that "each person ha[s] a number of 'selves,' each one focusing on the execution of one role at any one given time and situation....[T]he ability to adapt the self [is] essential in order to effectively communicate the social processes necessary within each institution" (p. 602). Similarly, Danielewicz (2001) uses Goffman to describe one's "desires 'to be' and 'to be seen to be' someone or something" (p. 61). This identity work always occurs in social contexts, and "all features of the social world are involved and affect not only what selves get presented, but also how they are interpreted, taken up, or transformed by our social partners" (p. 61).

By moving *teacher identity* into the social world, these scholars have essentially rejected the possibility that identity is something that resides entirely within the individual. Instead, it is performed, enacted and negotiated through every social interaction in which a teacher participates. This means teacher professional identity has an unavoidable relationship with the physical environment, political context, interpersonal relationships and cultural norms which compose professional contexts. The self has power and opportunity to negotiate, transgress or subvert these contextual factors, as well as reproduce them.

**Discourse and teacher identity.** In addition to pursuing a deeper understanding of how teacher identity is *social* in nature, researchers have been investigating the role of *discourse* in teacher identity formation. Collectively, this subsection of teacher identity scholarship understands discourses as "complex and powerful social processes that communicate particular perspectives on the world in terms of what is possible, what is right, desirable, and normal, and



[they] have ‘deep implications...for how we act’ (Cohen, 2008, p. 90 using Gee, 2005, p. 2). However, scholars differ in how they conceptualize the relationship between identity and discourse. Britzman (1992) argues that “we” are “vulnerable social subjects who produce and are being produced by culture,” and that we should understand identity as “a set of shifting answers to normative expectations” (p. 28). Soreide’s (2006) research argues for “an understanding of the subject as discursively produced” and argues for inquiry that focuses “on the structures these teachers are embedded in, and not on the teachers themselves” (p. 528). Watson (2006) challenges the notion that individuals are “completely subject to, or subjected by, the discourses we inhabit” (p. 510), and she believes individuals are able to “put their ‘own spin’ on” (p. 510) cultural belief systems. Cohen (2008) understands “discourse as a cultural practice that constitutes a tool in organizing social relationships in the construction of a ‘shared world’” (p. 83), and “teachers are not free to completely recreate...nor are they completely constrained by the effects of existing or prior structures” (p. 91).

This subsection of the teacher identity literature is particularly important for a number of reasons. First, it constructs teachers as restrained actors in school environments. While linear, developmental models imply that acquiring adequate skills and knowledge will give teachers all the necessary resources to be effective educators, such models do not critically examine the cultural myth of the “good” or “effective” educator (Moore, 2004), nor do they account for the cultural limitations placed on who can fill that role. Therefore, it is important to recognize who educators are expected to be and how the culture has come to decide on the kinds of professional performances allowed to be labeled as “effective” or “legitimate” in a school environment. Second, accounting for systems of cultural discourse in teacher identity research demands a more complicated theorization of identity as *social*. This means expanding the social environment with

which teachers interact beyond interpersonal relationships to also account for the systems of power that regulate the social world and create messages about who teachers should and should not be. Finally, Soreide's (2006) research raises the question: What should be our object of inquiry when doing research on teacher identity? She argues for a shift away from teachers themselves to the social structures in which teachers are "embedded," but what is lost if inquiry shifts too far from teachers' experiences negotiating those structures? How can teacher identity be theorized in such a way that is both attuned to how cultural systems function in schools and faithful to the belief that educators can push for changing the very systems in which they are embedded? Research on teacher agency begins to address these issues.

**Agency and teacher identity.** Research on teacher agency explores the relationship between identity and discourse in order to identify possibilities for negotiating, subverting, transgressing or resisting discursive regulation. In other words, these scholars research the degree to which it is possible to assert agency outside the productive and reproductive power of discourse. These scholars each created metaphors to illustrate their respective positions on agency and identity. MacLure (1993) calls identity claims *arguments* "[p]eople use...to *make sense* of themselves and their actions—to find order and consistency in the journey from past to present; to work out where they 'stand' in relation to others; to defend their attitudes and conduct" (p. 320). This image implies that identity is a metacognitive process that occurs continuously as individuals come in contact with new people and contexts. Liggett (2011) constructs teacher professional identity as a "site of struggle." This struggle occurs at the "interface between individual agency and subjectivity...and the hegemonic force of larger structures" (p. 185). While MacLure (1993) implies unlimited power to negotiate and interpret one's context as it is integrated into one's personal biography, Liggett argues that structural

forces “inhibi[t] [teachers’] developing sense of agency towards examining issues of power, social justice and diversity in education” (p. 187). The metaphor of struggle invokes an image of battle and possible frustration in the processes of asserting agency amidst structural power. Mockler (2011) argues, “professional identity has a ‘performative edge’” (p. 519), and the performance occurs through “storying” and “restorying” oneself as contexts change or new experiences occur. Performances of identity “can function as a practical and political tool...in countering current orthodoxies and ‘common sense’ understandings of teacher’ professional practice” (p. 518). Mockler’s vision for this kind of subversive “performance” includes “teacher activism” (p. 522), through which teachers “engage...with the politics of education” (p. 522) by linking their visions of “doing good” to their professional practice.

Teacher professional identity scholarship has been critical for framing this dissertation project because it provides tools for conceptualizing teacher allies’ possibilities for agency in their professional contexts. This study takes the position that professional identity is at the very core of how teachers make meaning of their professional contexts, the decisions they make, and the relationships they form with students. This means that each teacher ally’s framing of “the problem” of LGBTQ marginalization, vision for an optimal school environment, understanding of the school’s culture and her own position within it, and definition of her roles and responsibilities in supporting LGBTQ youth are all rooted in her professional identity. While teacher professional identity literature offers insight to teacher agency, the relationship between self and discourse, and the idea of developing a sense of professional self, it does not engage with possibilities for identity risk, threats to identity, or identity issues related to dominant group members’ alignment with marginalized groups. Insight to these issues can be found in Queer Theory and Critical Whiteness Studies’ explorations of the *ally* position.

## Critical Engagements with “Ally”

### Queer Theory and the Ally

There are two lines of questioning in queer scholarship that, while not using the term *ally*, are speaking directly to heterosexual-identified individuals who do “queer” scholarship or other kinds of professional and political work. First is queer scholars who interrogate the *straight-queer* (or *queerly straight*) position in academic contexts. Examinations of straight-identified scholars who engage in queer work occur as part of two general agendas: “interrogat[ing] critically the heterosexual subject ‘after queer theory’” (Schlichter, 2004, p. 544), or exploring the political possibilities for the straight-identified scholar. As summarized by Schlichter (2004) these theoretical projects have produced

...the figure of the ‘queer heterosexual’ or the ‘queer straight’ as a somewhat elusive subject of current critical discourse. Queer straights are lovers both of ‘the opposite gender’ and of queer discourse. What distinguishes them from the supportive ‘friends and relatives’ of gay people is their self-representation as potentially transgressive, queer subjects. (p. 544)

Schlichter’s (2004) distinction between “queer” and “supportive” is important. Straight-identified people who are supportive take action on behalf of the rights of their LGBTQ loved ones, colleagues, and students. They understand their actions in terms of reform-orientated identity politics (Youdell, 2011), which means their own positions in relation to the cultural system of heterosexuality are neither threatened nor shifted. The distinction between their own heterosexuality and their loved ones’ queerness remains clear, and heterosexual supporters remain “at ease in the world” which has been shaped by and for heteronormativity (Ahmed, 2004, p. 148). In other words, the space between “dominant” and “Other” is unmoved and

*straightness* and *queerness* (or, perhaps more accurately, *gayness*) are presumed to be stable categories with clear boundaries, making critical examination of the pervasive dominance of heterosexuality all but impossible. In order to disrupt taken-for-granted lines between “normal” and “Other,” heterosexual individuals need to question and destabilize their positions within heteronormative identity categories.

The second theme in queer scholarship that is relevant to this project is education scholars’ arguments for “queering” teachers and education. Rodriguez (2007) explains that such a project aims to enlarge “the scope of how gender, sexuality, and sexual identity can be taken up within the context of a critique of heterosexuality and heterosexual (teacher) identity” (p. xi). Meyer (2007a) proposes what straight teachers “need to know” about queer theory in order to disrupt heteronormative patterns of marginalization. She sees queer theory as an avenue for educators to imagine “possibilities that exist beyond the binaries of woman/man, masculine/feminine, student/teacher, and gay/straight,” and envisions educational environments that reflect “a more critical understanding of gender, sex, sexual orientation and how these identities and experiences are shaped and taught in schools” (p. 17). Her goal for applying queer theory to K-12 education is designing a “liberatory and queer pedagogy [that] empowers educators to examine and challenge the hierarchy of binary identities that is created and supported by schools” (p. 27). In other words, queer theory—and the application of its principles to the school environment—has the power to shift educators’ worldviews in transformative ways. Petrovic and Rosiek (2007) also argue for shifting educators’ worldviews in ways that overcome their unawareness of “the way heteronormative discourses shape their taken-for-granted assumptions about student behavior and feelings” (p. 211). They argue that teachers need to develop “critical knowledge of...their own thoughts, feelings, and values as the product of

historical and cultural processes of which they may not be fully aware” (p. 203), as well as a critical awareness of “the extent to which their practical [professional] knowledge is situated within and constructed by heteronormative discursive practices” (p. 225). In other words, they are calling for changes in educational practice that focus on identifying the ways that pedagogy has been shaped by heteronormative assumptions and then shifting pedagogy in ways that destabilizes the privilege of heterosexuality and binary gender in day-to-day classroom operations.

There are a number of ideas in these queer scholars’ discussions of the *straight* position within queer scholarship and activism to apply to an examination of straight allies in school settings. First, the long-term vision of queer theory is the destabilization of identity categories and the denaturalization of heterosexuality. From this theoretical standpoint, ally identity development models are fundamentally flawed because they construct the role of the ally as one who intervenes as problems (bias, harassment) arise; provides safety and respite; and fights for inclusion, visibility and rights of LGBTQ people—all of which are necessary battles but *none* threaten the stability of heterosexuality itself. Second, the work of queer education scholars draws attention to the possibilities for creating queer social change in educational institutions. Again, these scholars (Meyer, 2007a; Rodriguez, 2007; Petrovik & Rosiek, 2007) are challenging the assumption that violence intervention, sites of respite, and heightened visibility for LGBTQ students are sufficient “ally” actions. Instead, they are calling for educators to be given the critical tools to recognize how the stability of the gender binary, heterosexuality, and the hierarchical relation between *straight* and *queer* are assumed and reified in the public school environment. Significantly, these scholars are setting a standard for educators’ knowledge and action in the interest of disrupting heteronormativity, but much more work needs to be done on

the position of the “straight queer” K-12 teacher. However, this body of literature does not adequately address the straight ally as a privileged position. Critical Whiteness Theory’s discussion of complicity, privilege and the white ally offers useful tools for addressing this gap.

### **Critical Whiteness Studies and the Ally**

To date, ally scholarship has not included a conversation around the parallels between *white ally* and *straight ally*, although a few scholars have alluded to the potential insights that could be gained from such work. In her work with pre-service teachers, Clark (2010) expresses skepticism about relying on developmental models to understand her students’ growth. Clark sees similarities between heterosexual and white identity models and was guided by Audrey Thompson’s critique of white racial identity models:

...they suggest some idealized, developmental ‘end’ that we, as teacher educators, will recognize in our students once it is achieved. Moreover...much work on addressing privilege...turns into efforts at assuaging white guilt, once again positioning whiteness—or in this case, straightness—at the center of anti-work. (p. 707)

Likewise, Youdell (2011) argues that the cultural understanding of what identity politics are and how they function “allows the LGBTQ-friendly straight person to offer recognition and authorization to LGBTQ [peers, colleagues, students] while not opening up their own heterosexuality to the troubling that queer politics threatens” (p. 62). She speculates that investigations of the straight ally position would benefit from “Critical Race Theory’s [and Critical Whiteness Studies’] understanding of Whiteness and White Supremacy in order to think of the operations of the supremacy of Straightness” (p. 62). Alternatively, Mayo (2004) is concerned that Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness Studies *over* focus on *whiteness* itself and posits straight ally work as “one possible model for thinking about educating for social

change without encouraging the certainty of the dominant group to frame the terms of understanding” (p. 308). She argues that, rather than clarifying *straightness* or pursuing a positive straight identity, straight allies “examine and work against the benefits of those presumed to be heterosexual. In other words, [straight] allies trouble the certainty of heterosexuality” (308). While these three scholars differ in their visions of the relationship between white ally and straight ally action and identity, they each call for dialogue between the two.

In the field of teacher education, research on the “white ally” (Tatum, 1994) and anti-racist practice is informative for research on the “straight ally” because it examines the complications of privileged persons engaging in anti-oppressive work. This research explores pedagogical strategies for teaching pre-service teachers about Whiteness, guiding them as they come to terms with their own positions in systemic racial oppression, and helping them assume a professional position where they both continue to interrogate the pernicious power of racism *and* take anti-racist action. Aveling’s (2004) research on pre-service teachers is driven by the question: “To what extent does deconstructing whiteness help them become better teachers?” (para. 36). Although students indicated growth in their white ally identity development (according to Tatum’s model), how their growth would translate in their professional practice remained unclear.

Rather than use an identity development model, Mosley (2010) used racial literacy and Critical Race literacy pedagogy as frameworks for helping her students develop the skills and knowledge needed to integrate anti-racist pedagogy into their teaching practice. She examined how a single pre-service teacher’s developing theories about race, racism and racial literacy were “constructed through her anti-racist practices” (p. 452). Mosley found that her participant’s



experiences—which included successes and failures, trial-and-error, retreats and regroupings—challenged scholarship on anti-racist work in pre-service teacher education that utilized white ally development models, arguing: “there is no linear path to becoming an anti-racist teacher” (p. 467).

Vaught and Castagno (2008) examined teacher responses to anti-bias professional development in order to gain insight to how educators make meaning of “the nature of race and racism” (p. 95). Participant responses indicated an inability to recognize that White racial power permeates every institution” (p. 99), which prevented them from “understand[ing] how race and racism inform low student achievement” (p. 101). Teachers understood racism and white privilege in terms of individual experiences; subsequently, “they did not acknowledge [privilege’s] distribution across Whites and across settings” (p. 101).

These scholars call attention to a number of tensions and challenges associated with preparing mostly dominant-group teachers to educate marginalized students. First, the task at hand for teacher educators is to provide current and future educators the critical tools to interrogate systemic racism *and* pragmatic tools to engaging in anti-racist professional practice. Aveling (2004) cautions teacher educators to be mindful of the tension between wanting “students to enter the teaching profession knowing that they can...play their part in working against racism” and the pitfall of slipping into a pedagogical strategy that is overly individualistic and “gloss[es] over...the pernicious effect of institutional racism” (paragraph 37). Second, Mosley challenges teacher education’s utilization of identity development models because pedagogical strategies deriving from this framework have thus far been restricted to pre-service teachers statements of *intended* action, creating an assumption that those who state intent to engage in disruptive professional practice have “made it” to the ally position. Research like

Mosley's (2010) highlights the necessity of in-depth work around the materiality of assuming an anti-oppressive or *ally* identity position. Finally, Vaught and Castagno's (2008) research on educator learning about systemic oppression informs Ally work because it speaks to who and what we need anti-oppressive educators—*teacher allies*—to be. Embedded in that question are concerns about how educators negotiate new information about power, privilege, oppression, and the possibility to *act* in light of that knowledge (or denial of its “truth”). It also raises issues of Ally complicity, and speaks to the issue of those who say they are anti-oppressive educators without buying into or understanding systemic oppression. Teacher educators engaged with anti-heterosexist work (Clark, 2010; Vavrus, 2009) raise similar questions as they struggle to design effective pedagogy for preparing future teachers to work continuously to be critically conscious of their own dominant or privileged positions, understand systemic oppression in all its overwhelming complexity, and feel capable of taking anti-oppressive action.

Critical Whiteness Theory's critiques of the concept of “ally” are useful for exploring the straight ally for two over-arching reasons. First, this field has insight to offer in terms of the potential pitfalls of the ally position. Second, as argued by Youdell (2011), Critical Whiteness Theory's “understanding of Whiteness and White Supremacy” can offer useful insights for “think[ing] of the operations of the supremacy of Straightness” (p. 62). In other words, the pervasive, normalizing power of straightness must become as much of a concern as the political strategies necessary to dismantle it. Continuing exploration of the straight ally must include in-depth, critical examinations of the limitations of “ally development” approaches. In the wake of several highly publicized suicides of gay youth in Fall 2010, educational institutions have been under pressure to directly address the violence experienced by LGBTQ students and provide adequate support networks. Ally development is often an integral part of these efforts, and it is

important to consider what is really being accomplished through these programs. Thompson's (1997, 2003) critique of white ally identity development models has a nearly direct application to their counterparts in the straight ally identity development literature because she is raising fundamental questions about the very idea of privileged people serving as allies for a marginalized group. Her overarching argument is that anti-racist projects organized around white identity theories "keep whiteness at the center of antiracism" (2003, p. 15). The goal of these antiracist pedagogical strategies is "to be affirming, enabling, empowering" (p. 15) for white people who want to engage in antiracist work. The stages of development imply a point of arrival for allies—a point in which they "no longer concern [themselves] with how others see [them]" (p. 15). There is a feeling of "now what?" at the end of the white identity development narrative, as it is unclear how acquisition of a positive white identity moves antiracist work forward.

Another place where Critical Whiteness Theory is useful is its emphasis on considerations privileged persons should make as they engage in anti-oppressive work. For example, Yancy (2008) calls for continuous examination of structural whiteness in all its complexity because it will never be possible to reach a place of knowing or understanding. He cautions: "The moment a white person claims to have arrived, he/she often undergoes...a form of attack that points to how whiteness ensnares even as one strives to fight against racism" (p. 229). Being aware of this fact is not about finding comfort in one's own privilege, as white identity development models might suggest. Instead, he is calling for white antiracists to release the illusion that they have control over their positions in the social world:

[B]eing a white antiracist is never completely in one's control because such an identity is deferred by the sheer complexity of the fact that...one is ensconced within structural and

material power [of] racial hierarchies, that the white body is constituted by racist habits that create a form of racist inertia even as the white body attempts to undermine its somatic normativity, and that the white self undergoes processes of interpellation even as the white self engages in agential acts of racist disruption. (p. 231)

Yancy's (2008) description of the ways in which the privileged body is "ensconced" in structural and material power represents the overwhelming complexity of coming to understand one's own position of power, imagining possibilities for acting in the interest of dismantling these structures, and putting imagination to action *even though stepping outside one's dominant position is impossible*. This is an argument that is absent in the scholarship on the straight ally—as the ally identity development literature does not go beyond expecting allies to know they are privileged, and conversations around the "straight queer" are more intent on queering the lines between "norm" and "other" than examining how the straight body is inescapably "ensconced" in structural heteronormativity.

### **Teachers and LGBTQ Issues**

Empirical research on in-service, K-12 teacher allies is typically conducted in the context of professional development on LGBTQ issues. Towery (2007) and Schneidewind and Cathers (2003) conducted research on engaging educators in long-term professional development experiences that aimed to provide tools for taking up anti-oppressive professional practices. Both of these programs made a concentrated effort to empower educators to disrupt heterosexist policies and practices, and in both cases teachers indicated adequate knowledge and skills to engage in professional practice that would disrupt systemic inequities. Significantly, participants in both studies emphasized the importance of collegial support in feeling confident to take risks

and confront heterosexist practices in their schools—a finding that speaks to stigma surrounding LGBTQ advocacy.

Research on teachers' interpretations of "gendered harassment" (Meyer, 2008), or "gender-based bullying" (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009) lends insight to how the bullying discourse is present in teachers' understanding of their responsibility to intervene. Meyer (2008) examined educators' rationales for intervening when they witnessed gendered harassment (i.e. homophobic harassment, [hetero]sexual harassment, harassment targeting gender non-conformity), and she argued that internal and external influences interact in teachers' decisions for how to respond to gendered harassment. Her findings indicated that school administration often did not respond to "non-violent" homophobic harassment, so teachers felt they were acting alone if they chose to address this issue. Teachers identified inconsistent or uneven implementation of bullying policies as a factor in their decision-making: overt physical violence was always addressed, but homophobic language often was not considered serious enough for sanction. Colleagues' beliefs about gender and sexual equity also played a factor in school-wide consistency. The overall trend in Meyer's (2008) findings is that there are types of violence where intervention is not up for negotiation—anything overtly physically violent—while calling a student "gay" or "faggot" can easily go without consequence. This approach is indicative of bullying research and anti-bullying programs that measure success through the number of reported bullying incidents. Measuring change in this way focuses educators' attention on violence that is easily seen and minimizes the significance of more subtle forms of aggression.

Anagnostopoulos et al. (2009) examined how educators interpreted and addressed different types of gender-based bullying in a school with a comprehensive sexual harassment policy. Their findings reflect the emphasis the bullying discourse places on visible, physical acts

of violence, but they also found that teachers' choices about whether or not to intervene—and their feelings of competence—reflected heteronormative social norms for gender roles and “appropriate” adolescent (hetero)sexual interaction. Educators consistently responded when boys targeted “quiet girls,” but the policy “provided staff members little assistance” (p. 522) for responding to possible harassment within heterosexual dating relationships or harassment targeting gay and lesbian students. Participating teachers who admonished students for using homophobic language “did so in ways that silenced discussion of sexuality and that often positioned gay and lesbian students as either sexual harassers or as causing the violence directed against them” (p. 543). It is significant to note that these educators *believed their actions against homophobic bullying were effective* because they fulfilled their professional obligation to ask students to stop. They did not educate students about why their actions were unacceptable—which means they avoided discussing topics (sexuality) that might not be “appropriate.”

Examining the relationship between educators' anti-heterosexist professional practice and discourses of professionalism and professional responsibility is becoming more prevalent in research on educators' experiences engaging with LGBTQ issues in school contexts. Mills' (1995) and Ngo's (2003) research projects both speak to how educators' action in the school environment is intertwined with institutional discourses about the roles of schools and teachers. Mills' research on attempts in an Australian high school to raise awareness and disrupt heterosexism suggests that institutional discourses of professionalism, consensus, and maturity worked together to “emphasi[ze] a hierarchised difference between students and teachers and the need to maintain that difference to preserve the social ‘good’ of an orderly and efficiently functioning school” (p. 325). Professionalism has the potential to be used by teachers as justification for advocating for and with LGBTQ students; however, in this case it functioned as

a mechanism for controlling teachers' actions. Consensus "constructs an image of a teaching group which is committed to the same goals" (p. 318)—thus carrying the implication that "challenging the legitimacy of hegemonic interests" (p. 319) will disrupt the cohesiveness of the professional group.

The teachers in Ngo's (2003) school ethnography were in a professional context where school administration endorsed support of LGB students and issues. Educators in this study expressed competence and willingness to address homophobic language and harassment and teach their students about "tolerance," but they resisted integrating LGB content in their curriculum because they did not believe they had adequate knowledge or resources. Ngo (2003) argues that their views are "influenced, in part, by a discourse of 'good teaching,'" which "cite[s] iterations that tell us that in order to address LGBQ issues well in the classroom, we need first to have 'proven' methods or *the* correct method of teaching such issues" (p. 120). In other words, teachers are falling back on taken-for-granted notions of "good teaching" which "positions effective teaching practices in a place of certainty or inflexibility" (p. 121). Like the professionalism discourse (Mills, 1995), this "good teaching" discourse elevates teachers to a position of unquestionable authority. When coupled with the bullying discourse, the "professional" educator acts in the interest of LGBTQ students in ways that maintains their alignment with institutional authority. Acting in the interest of safety or tolerance is very unlikely to create dissonance between the teacher's position and the school's norms for professional action. Questioning, critiquing or disrupting heteronormative policies and practices is dangerous because it shifts the teacher's position towards alignment with students' interests.

Professionalism and professional responsibility are discursive frameworks that allow teachers to tie support for LGBTQ students to their schools' norms for good teaching, and it is a

strategy for managing the stigma and risk that accompanies anti-heterosexist educational practice. Although teachers “do not necessarily have empirical data to support their view that taking action will cost them their job” (Schmidt et al., 2012, p. 1182), they experience the risk as authentic and a significant barrier that limits their support of LGBTQ students. Fear of professional consequences—from parent complaints, to conflict with administrators, to termination—make teachers hesitate to speak directly about gender and sexual diversity with their students. In their research with primary school teachers in the UK, Atkinson and DePalma’s (2008) participants believed that “expressing sexualities equality in the classroom might be inappropriate and/or dangerous” (p. 27). Bower and Klecka’s (2009) research on teachers’ willingness to affirm LGBTQ parents reflected powerful social norms around teachers’ roles, as teachers in this study relied on discourses of professionalism to rationalize defining their responsibility to LGBTQ families in terms of protection rather than affirmation. Teachers felt a responsibility to secure the physical and emotional safety (prevent bullying) of students with LGBTQ parents and perceived this to be in line with institutional norms for good teaching. Heightened visibility of LGBTQ identities was understood to be beyond the boundaries of professionalism because it may challenge the beliefs of administration or (straight) parents. Thus, the choices made by participating teachers “were heteronormative, continually reinforcing heterosexuality as normal and natural while either positioning LGBTQ identities as deviant or invisible” (p. 370). Clark’s (2010) participants cited “parents, administrators, and the socio-political climate were seen as the major barriers to [anti-heterosexist] work” (p. 710), and their response to these perceived barriers was to retreat professionally and politically “safe” positions of protecting students but not advocating for equality or directly addressing gender and sexual diversity in any way. Schmidt et al.’s (2012) participants claimed that “taking action to redress



LGB injustice meant risking being labeled LGB or losing one's job" (p. 1181). Significantly, these pre-service educators connected professional risk with threats to personal identity, and they claimed that "the safest situation is to be straight and married, otherwise, teachers who act on behalf of LGB populations risk being misidentified or stigmatized" (p. 1182).

The current discourse on bullying, positive climate, and "safe and supportive" schools defines teachers' professional responsibility for supporting LGBTQ students in terms of tolerance and acceptance, increasing safety, and strengthening support networks. These "acceptable" versions of teacher ally work are important because they allow support for LGBTQ students to happen in school, but they are not enough to alleviate the concern that directly addressing gender and sexual diversity or LGBTQ equality is a "safe" thing for teachers to do. Overall, research on teachers' experiences supporting LGBTQ students or addressing gender-based harassment indicates that the professional standard is being shaped by taken-for-granted beliefs about what bullying *is*, by heteronormative values that silence discussions of gender or sexual diversity, and by discourses of professionalism. When these three discourses work together, "the problem" becomes very simple and educators have a claim to professional diligence if they prevent significant harm to LGBTQ individuals who sit in their classrooms.

To date, research in this area has been concerned with how and why educators make meaning of and address gender or sexual orientation-based harassment (or not). Researchers have posed questions about how personal bias and cultural norms shape or limit educators' actions in the interest of LGBTQ students. Future work on the role of educators as supporters, advocates, or allies for LGBTQ youth will need to continue exploring how educators are citing these discourses in their professional decision-making and identify opportunities for expanding educational and political discourses to encompass the broadest possible understanding of how

and why LGBTQ students are marginalized in K-12 educational settings. This dissertation is designed to contribute to a deeper understanding of how these educators make meaning of this work, how they define their positions of “advocates,” “supporters,” or “allies,” how they position themselves in relation to colleagues and students, how they integrate “ally” work into their understanding of self as professionals, and how cultural discourse shapes the expectations and possibilities for professional behavior.

## **Chapter 3: RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **Purpose and Rationale**

Educators are being called on to provide “safe and supportive” learning environments for all students, and yet successfully supporting LGBTQ youth remains an elusive goal as this group of students continues to be disproportionately victimized by their peers. The research on this topic has primarily occurred in undergraduate, teacher education contexts where pre-service teachers are taught about the experiences of LGBTQ students and institutional heteronormativity and data are collected to determine (1) their understanding of anti-heterosexist professional practice; and (2) their intent or commitment to becoming allies for LGBTQ youth (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Clark, 2010; Vavrus, 2009). The topic of in-service straight teacher allies has gone almost totally unexplored in educational research; therefore, there is very little insight to how these educators become allies or how they execute the actions associated with being an ally. In the school environment, this can be a complicated issue because, while heterosexual teachers have freedom to act in the interest of LGBTQ youth in ways their LGBTQ-identified colleagues likely cannot (Goldstein & Davis, 2010; Myers, 2008; Washington & Evans, 1991), many report they are taking a significant professional risk by engaging in “ally” work (Curran et al., 2009; Payne & Smith, 2011). Teacher allies’ negotiations of privilege and risk are, therefore, worthy of close attention.

The tension between bullying research and qualitative investigations of institutional heteronormativity provide the framework for this project’s understanding of the social, political and professional “space” teacher allies occupy as they work to support LGBTQ students in their school environments. Research on LGBTQ bullying and harassment has contributed to a “discourse of bullying” which “has become a highly visible, regulative socio-cultural

phenomenon circulating well beyond the institutional cultures of schooling” (Ringrose & Renold, 2010, p. 574). This scholarship focuses on the behavior and attitudes of individuals, individual-to-individual dynamics of aggression, and aims to identify environmental factors that may affect the frequency of aggression when they are manipulated. Expectations for what schools and educators are supposed to *do* are, therefore, being defined in terms of managing student behavior. Critical qualitative inquiry challenges this discourse with insight to how social stigma and marginalization work “in the most mundane moments everyday inside schools” (Youdell, 2006, p. 13). This research calls attention to how the social marginalization of LGBTQ students is subtle and continuous (Bortolin, 2010; Pascoe, 2007; Sue, 2010; Thurlow, 2001; Youdell, 2006) and the ways that teachers’ possibilities for successful intervention are being shaped (and limited) by both the invisible power of heterosexism and discourses of “professionalism” that define the roles and responsibilities of educators (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009; Bower & Klecka, 2009; Curran et al., 2009; Ngo, 2003). This work has significantly expanded and deepened the understanding of how heterosexism functions in the school environment, but more work needs to be done around educators’ roles in both reproducing and disrupting these systems of power and oppression.

This dissertation addressed two gaps within educational research. First, while research on heteronormativity in schooling provides a framework for examining teachers’ positions in the school environment, this body of work lacks in-depth inquiry about the experiences of educators who identify themselves as allies or supporters for LGBTQ students. Second, research literature on heterosexual or straight allies is limited in its focus ally “development” and the specific skills and knowledge required to be called an “ally.” However, very little is known about how allies *do* the work, how they understand the needs of LGBTQ youth, define their identities as teacher

allies, and negotiate professional norms and heteronormative school cultures to engage in ally work. Therefore, this research pursued an overall goal of learning about the professional identities, perspectives, and day-to-day professional practice of educators who have experience supporting LGBTQ students.

### **Project Overview**

This purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of female, straight-identified public school teachers who identify themselves as “allies” or “supporters” of LGBTQ youth in rural, urban and suburban middle and high schools in Central New York. Throughout the research process, the goal was to gain in-depth insight to how participants integrate support for LGBTQ students into the numerous facets of their complicated professional lives. Therefore, both interview and observation data reflects teachers’ experiences with curriculum, classroom management, developing relationships with students, and any other professional experiences participants introduced as relevant to being an ally for LGBTQ students. Therefore, this research was interested in participants’ specific experiences of interacting with LGBTQ youth and making gender and sexual diversity part of their curriculum, *and* in how these experiences were situated within broader contexts of teacher identity, professional responsibility, curriculum, or professional norms that define “good” teaching.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do heterosexual teachers come to claim the position of “ally” or “supporter” for LGBT students?
2. How do participants interpret the needs of LGBTQ students and define their roles in meeting those needs?

3. What are participants' perspectives on the possibilities and limitations for "ally" action in their school contexts?
4. How are participants' claims of "ally" or "supporter" visible in their classroom practice?  
Or not?

## **Context**

### **Reduction of Stigma in Schools**

This research was designed in light of the author's experiences as Intern and Professional Development Coordinator for the Reduction of Stigma in Schools program at Syracuse University. The Reduction of Stigma in Schools Program (RSIS) is a research-based, educator-to-educator professional development model that aims to generate dialogue on the experiences of LGBTQ students and provide tools for creating more inclusive learning environments (Payne & Smith 2010, 2011). RSIS has been providing professional development to schools within a thirty-mile radius of Syracuse University since 2006, and the author designed program content, executed school outreach efforts, and facilitated professional development workshops between Fall 2008 and Spring 2013. Additionally, the author collaborated with Dr. Elizabeth Payne to complete a program evaluation of RSIS (Payne & Smith 2010, 2011, & 2012), which involved interviewing twelve teachers, guidance counselors, and school social workers who attended RSIS workshops between 2006 and 2009. These professional development and research experiences informed the research questions and design of the current study and provided the opportunity to develop a professional network of educators who believed that LGBTQ topics need more attention in public schools. Several individuals in this network volunteered to assist with distribution of the Invitation to Participate for this dissertation research. Additionally, all schools that received the Invitation to Participate received information about RSIS professional

development opportunities between 2006 and 2010. Not all schools invited the professional development in their schools, but this history of communication about the needs of LGBTQ students set a precedent for granting access for school-based research on LGBTQ issues.

### **Geography**

Research occurred in one middle school, one K-8 school, and three high schools representing four school districts in Central New York<sup>11</sup>. These schools were chosen because teachers in these schools responded to an Invitation to Participate<sup>12</sup> that was distributed to 65 public secondary schools within a thirty-mile radius of Syracuse University. This geographical region was chosen for three reasons. First, RSIS provided information about LGBTQ professional development opportunities to schools in this region annually between Fall 2006 and Fall 2010, and program personnel worked with schools that expressed need or interest to develop educators' competence around supporting LGBTQ youth through the beginning of the study in Fall 2013. School districts familiar with RSIS—and with its School of Education connection—were believed to potentially be open to this research. It was also believed that schools districts that were not familiar with RSIS but had connections to the School of Education may be more likely to support this research. Second, the 30-mile radius around Syracuse University was convenient for the researcher and encompassed a variety of school districts: rural, suburban and urban. Observing participants in a variety of settings created diverse opportunities for insight to the ways that institutional and community context are relevant to issues of supporting LGBTQ students. Third, the researcher had developed a network of educators throughout this geographic region through her work as an RSIS trainer and coordinator since Fall 2008. This network was utilized to acquire research access in schools and identify potential participants.

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix A for school enrollment and demographic data.

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix B for the Invitation to Participate

## Participants

### Participant Criteria

Female-identified, straight-identified, public middle or high school classroom teachers in Central New York who identified as “supportive” or an “ally” for LGBTQ students were eligible for this study. This vocabulary for support of LGBTQ youth was chosen because “ally” is the term used in P-12 education, higher education and social movement literature to label or identify heterosexual, gender conforming individuals who take action in the interest of equity, equality or safety of LGBTQ people (Clark, 2010; Duhigg et al., 2010; Myers, 2008; Washington & Evans, 1991). “Supportive” reflects the vocabulary participating educators in RSIS research projects have used to identify or describe themselves (Payne & Smith, 2010, 2011; Smith, in press). Female-identified participants were the focus of this research because (1) these criteria are representative of the majority of public educators in the United States (Feistritzer, Griffin, & Linnajarvi, 2011); and (2) the research questions for this study were developed in light of RSIS evaluation research findings (Payne & Smith, 2010, 2011, 2012; Smith, in press)—projects for which all participants have been women and where findings indicated that participants’ gendered professional positions were relevant to their work as allies. This research focused on straight-identified teachers—as opposed to lesbian or queer-identified teachers—because the aim was to examine the possible tensions that occur in relation to the stigmatization of LGBTQ-supportive work in school contexts and the participants’ privileged, heterosexual social positions. Educators who have participated in past RSIS research projects or have coordinated RSIS programming in their schools were not eligible to participate due to their familiarity with the researcher’s positions on schools, teaching and LGBTQ advocacy.

Participants were recruited from middle and high schools because public rhetoric around the “need” to support LGBTQ students is focused on these grade levels. The discourse is



different in elementary schools, where it is widely assumed that sexuality is irrelevant to educating children because they are too young to know anything about or experience romantic or sexual desire and attraction (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010). While the goal was to collect teachers' experiences across diverse contexts within a single geographic area, the project was not designed to produce findings intending to be representative of all teacher allies' experiences.

### **Participant Recruitment**

The challenge of recruiting participants for school-based LGBTQ research is significant. Proposing research focused in issues of inequality and marginalization experienced by LGBTQ youth pushes school personnel to recognize and discuss the sexual and gender differences in their schools. Researchers who focus on LGBTQ educational issues have reported experiences where school leaders resisted or denied research access (Meyer, 2007b; Payne & Smith, 2014), and these experiences reflect a history of silencing of LGBTQ issues that occurs in K-12 schools (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Fredman et al, 2013). In order to mitigate these challenges, the Invitation to Participate was distributed widely to maximize the number of teachers who would have access to the possibility of participating in this research. The teachers who volunteered for this study self-selected in response to a call for teachers who “support” LGBTQ students, and each interpreted this role in her own way.

Participants were recruited in two stages. First, an “Invitation to Participate” and letter of introduction<sup>13</sup> were distributed via email to two groups: (1) school principals within the RSIS geographic perimeter; and (2) individual educators who were participants in the RSIS evaluation research study (Payne & Smith, 2010) or who coordinated RSIS workshops or other

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix C for Letter of Introduction and Request for Research Access

programming of The Queering Education Research Institute (QuERI)<sup>14</sup> coming into their schools between Fall 2008 and Fall 2011. Those in the second group are educators with whom the author developed a professional relationship between 2008 and 2011, and many indicated willingness to connect the author with colleagues who—like them—have expressed an interest or investment in supporting LGBTQ students. In total, 69 school administrators and 15 additional educators received the request to distribute the Invitation to Participate in October 2011 and again in November 2011. While it is unknown how many administrators distributed the invitation to the teachers in their buildings, seven participants volunteered within six weeks of initial contact with administrators. Of the first seven volunteers, six taught in suburban schools and one taught in a rural school. The Invitation was distributed to the administrator list a third time in December 2011, but no additional teachers volunteered as a result of this recruitment method. The second stage of participant recruitment focused specifically on adding urban teachers to the study. Urban teachers within the researcher's professional network were contacted to request recommendations for specific teachers who fit the criteria and would potentially be interested in the study. One teacher was recruited through this method, and she recommended three more. One of those three recommended teachers volunteered to participate.

### **Description of Participants**

The nine teachers who volunteered for this research represent a diverse set of experiences as public school teachers. Their years of teaching experience ranged from two to 28 years. For some teaching was their first and only career, some returned to college for teacher certification a few years after completing their bachelor's degrees, and some began teaching as a second career.

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<sup>14</sup> The Queering Education Research Institute© is an independent qualitative research and training center formally affiliated with Syracuse University School of Education, Cultural Foundations of Education Department. Primary QuERI activities include: qualitative research on LGBTQ Issues in Education; creating and delivering research-based professional development trainings; and providing research-based approaches to creating supportive environments for LGBTQ youth and the children of LGBTQ families.

Seven teachers worked in suburban schools, one worked in a rural school, and two in urban schools. Recruiting only White teachers was not intentional, but no focused efforts were made to diversify the racial demographics of participant group. Given that 84 percent of K-12 public school teachers in the United States are White (Feistritzer et al., 2011), it is acknowledged that more focused participant recruitment procedures would likely be necessary in order to collect data that represents the perspectives of teachers of color.<sup>15</sup>

Participants reported varying levels of direct experience working with LGBTQ youth. Some had numerous specific stories of working with LGBTQ students, and others reported very little direct experience with LGBTQ students but a strong commitment to creating “safe,” “welcoming,” or “comfortable” classrooms. A specific amount or level of direct experience was not a criteria for this study because, beyond providing care and support for specific students, ally work could encompass a broad range of action that aims to disrupt homophobic bias, gender stereotypes, challenge heteronormative assumptions, or change institutional practices that privilege heterosexual students.

1. Molly<sup>16</sup> taught social studies at a suburban high school, and she had 21 years of teaching experience divided across two different suburban school districts. She was married with two school-age daughters. She reported that she had little direct experience with students she knew to be LGBTQ-identified. She connected her participation to liberal political views and overall concern for making students feel safe and welcome in class.

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<sup>15</sup> While it is acknowledged that there are persistent cultural stereotypes in the U.S. claiming that people of color, particularly African Americans, are disproportionately homophobic, this research does not draw any connection between the all-White participant sample and such stereotypes. Rather, it is interpreted as indicative of a need for more diverse and creative sampling procedures in future research.

<sup>16</sup> All names are pseudonyms

2. Susan was a foreign language teacher who had four years experience in a suburban high school and two years of prior experience in an urban high school. She was recently married. Her introductory email stated: “I really would like to help you. I strongly support and believe in your project and research.” She was the only participant who reported having any academic background in gender studies, and she had several stories about being an active ally when she was an undergraduate at a women’s college in the Northeast United States.
3. Laura introduced herself as a “career change teacher,” and she had been a research scientist for 12 years prior to becoming a science teacher at a suburban high school. She had been a teacher for eight years at the time of this research. Her experience as a woman in a male-dominated professional field shaped many of her stories about teaching—primarily stories about developing girls’ confidence in their science knowledge and situations where she needed to use the “people skills” she developed in her previous career to manage conflict. Laura was married and her son had attended the same school where she was a teacher, although he graduated prior to this research.
4. Rachel was an English teacher in an urban high school. She had been at the same school for twelve years, and she also student taught in the same school. She was married with two young children, and she claimed that her experiences of marrying a mixed-race man and raising mixed-race children had shaped some of her thinking about what she teaches her students about navigating experiences of marginalization or discrimination.
5. Megan was an English teacher who had twenty-eight years of experience in multiple schools in the same urban school district. She was teaching seventh grade during the research, but she had spent most of her career in high schools. She was married with two

adult children. In her introductory email, she stated: “I am the parent of a gay child and I have had many students over the years who were LGBTQ and afraid to discuss it with most people.”

6. Karen taught foreign language in a suburban high school and had fifteen years of teaching experience across two suburban school districts. Her current school was the same high school she attended. She worked in a series of jobs for seven years after her bachelor’s degree and then returned to school for her master’s degree and teacher certification. She told several stories about her close relationships with gay and lesbian friends, and she referred to these friendships when she talked about her motivation for supporting LGBTQ students. She was the only participant who was not in a long-term partnership.
7. Kelly was in her second year of teaching science at a suburban high school. She “kind of bounced all over the place” for two years after her bachelor’s degree and then returned to school for her master’s degree and teacher certification. She got engaged and was planning her wedding during the data collection period—a topic many students liked to discuss with her.
8. Tina had fifteen years of experience teaching reading in a rural middle school, and prior to that she taught English in two other schools in other regions of New York. Her husband was also a teacher in the same school district, and their two children were in elementary school. She grew up in a small town near her current school district, and her perception of the community was that very few LGBTQ people are “out” or even live in the area. She connected many of her perspectives on homophobia and supporting

LGBTQ students to her brother and childhood friend, who both came out as adults but had a hard time while they went through school.

9. Paula was in her fifth year of teaching social studies at a suburban high school. She got married a few months before data collection began, and her husband was a teacher in another school district. Her father was also a social studies teacher in the same school.

### **Methods**

Data collection occurred between November 2011 and June 2012. Seven participants participated in three interviews and approximately 15 hours of classroom observation. Two participants entered the study in the last three months of data collection. They participated in as much of the process as possible before the end of the school year: two interviews and approximately eight hours of classroom observation. The first interaction with each participant was a life history interview, the second interview occurred at the mid-point of the observation period, and the third occurred after all observations had been completed. The purpose for combining interview and observation methods was to collect data and engage participants in dialogues about the connections and contradictions between their interview narratives about teaching and their classroom practice. The result of this data collection structure was ongoing conversations with each teacher about their complicated professional lives.

#### **Life History Interview**

**Rationale.** This method was chosen because it centers educators' own narratives, descriptions, and understanding of *self* both as professionals and as allies or supporters for LGBTQ students. Life history, or *life story* (Linde, 1993) is based on the premise that individuals have an impulse to have a coherent self-understanding and a coherent narrative for communicating self to others:

Life stories express our sense of self: who we are and how we got that way. They are also one very important means by which we communicate this sense of self and negotiate it with others. Further, we use these stories to claim or negotiate group membership and to demonstrate that we are in fact worthy members of those groups, understanding and properly following their moral standards. Finally, life stories touch on the widest of social constructions, since they make presuppositions about what can be taken as expected, what norms are, and what common or special belief systems can be used to establish coherence. (Linde, 1993, p. 3)

The specific objective of these interviews was to gain insight to how the educators constructed their professional lives as teachers—to learn the language educators used to describe their professional experiences, to learn where “ally” work is positioned in relationship to other professional responsibilities, and to learn how they came to the LGBTQ “ally” or “supporter” identity claim. Further, stories about professional experiences provided insight to the kinds of observations that made the most sense for each educator’s respective context.

**Procedures.** The life history interview was the first interaction with each participant. Interviews took place at a time and location of the participants’ choosing. Most chose their own classrooms or another private school space (office or conference room) after school or during a planning period. One participant chose her home on a Sunday afternoon as the most convenient time and comfortable location for this interview. Interview lengths ranged from fifty minutes to two hours and ten minutes; the two interviews that were shorter than one hour were cut short due to limitations in the participants’ schedules. Interviews were audio-recorded and field notes were taken during the interview, primarily to aid the author in recording key ideas and experiences that required probes for more in-depth information.

The purpose of the life history interview was presented to participants as a means to “get to know them as a teacher.” An interview protocol<sup>17</sup> containing twelve questions with possible probes was used as a guideline for the interview. The questions covered topics including professional history, descriptions of teaching style and identity, perspectives on school culture, their history of experiences with gender and sexual diversity, and how they came to identify as allies. The first two interview questions—“Tell me about your path to becoming a teacher” and “Describe yourself as a teacher”—were used grand tour questions. This means that for each question the participants were allowed to talk for as long as they could, and follow-up questions were used to probe for specific stories and examples and to collect as many details as possible about their experiences of becoming educators and how they defined their professional selves. Once these lines of questioning had been exhausted, the researcher returned to the interview protocol and asked questions that had not already been answered. Specific questions about ally identity and their experiences around gender and sexual diversity were purposefully left until the end of the interview unless the participants introduced the topics earlier. This question sequence was chosen because past interviewing experiences have indicated that, even though they know the interview will be addressing gender and sexual diversity and issues related to supporting LGBTQ youth in schools, participants are often uncomfortable speaking about these topics—whether because of the stigmatization of these topics or because they do not feel knowledgeable enough to speak with confidence and authority. Therefore, the interview was designed to allow time for participants to become comfortable with the interviewer and the process of answering interview questions before addressing stigmatized topics.

### **Participant Observation**

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<sup>17</sup> See Appendix D for Life History Interview Protocol



**Rationale.** The purpose of the observations was to examine the ways participants' "ally" or "supporter" identity claims were present (or not) in their classroom practice. Further, the ethnographic records (Spradley, 1980) representing each observed class session were detailed records of classrooms that participants described as welcoming, safe, and comfortable for all students, including LGBTQ youth. Participant observation (Spradley, 1980) is a method for collecting ethnographic observational data that conceptualizes the researcher as an actor in the social site she is observing. It is impossible to eliminate the possibility that she will be noticed as an outsider, asked why she is present or what she is working on, or inadvertently alter the routine behaviors of the social actors who are insiders to the research site. In other words, it is not possible for the researcher to completely remove herself from the social action she is observing. Levels of participation may vary from "passive" to "complete" participation. "Passive participation" was chosen as the appropriate level of participation for this research context, which meant the researcher was "present at the scene of action but did not participate or interact with other people to any great extent" (Spradley, 1980, p. 59). This level of participation was chosen because the goal for observations was to create a detailed record of classroom routines, interactive patterns between students and teachers, student behavior during instruction, methods for teaching academic content, and methods for managing student behavior. Therefore, it was necessary for the researcher to be as unobtrusive as possible and minimize the possibility for disruption.

**Procedures.** Participant observations occurred between November 2011 and June 2012. Participants were observed between four and nine times. Decisions about how many times each teacher was observed were based on how long each teacher could be observed during a single visit. The goal was for each teacher to be observed for approximately ten clock hours. In total,

approximately 90 clock hours of classroom time were observed. The number and frequency of observations was chosen with the intent to create a “thick record of social routines” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 52) for each participant’s teaching practice.

The goal for researcher positionality was to establish a regular, passive presence in the classroom in order to minimize the degree to which the purpose of the study itself shifted participants’ professional practice during observation periods. In order to blend into the landscape of adults in each school, clothing choices were made to match the professional norms of the classroom being observed. For most observations this meant wearing khakis or dress pants with a sweater or shirt and jacket. In other school many teachers—including the participant—wore jeans every day, so clothing choices were adjusted to align with this contextual detail. In most classrooms the researcher sat in the back or to the side of the room and was known to students as a researcher from Syracuse University who was observing their teacher. Occasionally, students seemed to forget, and they asked periodically if the researcher was a student teacher or a substitute. Conversations were never initiated with students, but their questions were answered on the rare occasions that they occurred. They often wondered how it was possible to write so many notes without my hand cramping, or they talked about their school work. For the most part, students acted as if there was not a visitor in the room.

Observations notes were handwritten in spiral notebooks and transcribed after leaving the field, resulting in 266 pages of transcribed field notes. The overall goal was to record a complete and detailed picture of each class session. However, classrooms are complicated social environments. It would be impossible to capture the details of all social interactions of teachers and 15 to 25 students. A two-tier priority structure was created to aid with decisions about where to focus attention during each observation. Teacher action was the first priority, so all action

related to leading the class and all teacher interactions with students were recorded using concrete language. As much verbatim dialogue was captured as possible and marked as direct quotations in field notes with quotation marks. Summarized speech was labeled “approximate quote” when language was close to verbatim, or “summary” when language was paraphrased. The second priority was student-to-student interactions. The ability to hear conversations between students was often limited by researcher position in the room, but as many concrete details were recorded as time allowed. During the first observation with each participant, physical details about the classroom were recorded; subsequent observations included additional notes about changes in the environment or details that had not been noticed previously.

### **Semi-structured Interview**

**Rationale.** Semi-structured interviews are an effective methodological tool for collecting participants’ accounts of social activity and descriptions of how they understand their own identities and positions within these activities. The goal of these interviews was to elicit narratives about routine activities recorded during classroom observations, as well as activities that disrupted the routine or were considered “abnormal.” For example, the science teacher who talked to her classes about trusting her and not getting anxious about new, difficult material was reminded of this episode during a semi-structured interview and asked to elaborate on her processes for minimizing student anxiety. The participant who walked by me and said, “I bet you’re getting a lot of good notes today!” was asked in her next interview to reflect on that particular class and the things that were going on that she believed would be noticeable or important to me. Overall, interview questions were designed to encourage descriptive accounts where participants describe what happened, their interpretation of the events, their understanding

of their own positions within the events, and—if the participant introduces such connections to the dialogue—description of the relationship between the event and her professional identity.

**Procedures.** For seven of the participants, semi-structured interviews occurred twice during the data collection period: one at the mid-point of participant observation and one at the end of participant observation. The two participants who joined the study late participated in one semi-structured interview after their observations had been completed. Interviewing at the mid-point of the project's observation phase served two purposes: First, it allowed for the compilation of a thick, primary record of classroom routines as a passive observer before asking specific questions about classroom practice and daily professional experiences. Second, the first semi-structured interview occurred close enough to the life history interview that it was possible to ask the participants specific clarifying questions about those interviews. The second semi-structured interview aimed to acquire participants' perspectives on observation data collected during the second half of the observation phase and summative reflections on their positions as educators who identify themselves as “allies” or “supporters” for LGBTQ youth.

Semi-structured interviews ranged from forty minutes to two hours in length, and all were conducted at a time and in a location of the participants' choosing. All but one interview occurred in a school setting; one participant chose to have one of the semi-structured interviews occur in her home. Prior to each interview, the field notes and transcripts from previous interviews were reviewed, and the content of those documents was used to determine topics that required more input from the participant and write an interview protocol. Additionally, all participants were given opportunities to share experiences that they believed were relevant to the research but occurred when the researcher was not present. On a few occasions, when the researcher arrived for an interview the participant said, “I have a story for you!” On those

occasions, the interview started with the teacher's story and then transitioned to the interviewer's questions.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Critical Ethnography and Systems Analysis**

Data analysis was informed by Carspecken's (1996) critical qualitative method, which is part of a tradition of critical qualitative research that holds the position that "[t]he precise nature of oppression is an empirical question and not a given belief," and aims "to clarify how and where oppression works" (p. 8). Further, Carspecken argues that "the analysis of systems relations is both epistemologically possible and absolutely crucial to gain a full understanding of qualitative research findings" (p. 194). He defines *social systems* as "the result of external and internal influences on action that are very broadly distributed throughout a society. They are reproduced through patterned activity stretching across wide reaches of space and time" (p. 38). That is, a social system such as heteronormativity is understood to be made up of broadly-reaching belief systems, social norms, policies, and practices that assume, privilege, or reward heterosexual sexual orientation and gender identities that are aligned with two binary possibilities for biological sex: male and female. This social system is reproduced by "human activities that have become patterned" (p. 38) in accordance with taken-for-granted "truths" about sex and gender, and the marginalization of non-normative gender and sexual identities are perpetuated through systemic heteronormativity. Examining the patterns of activity, norms, and policies that coalesce to form a social system, as well as how social actors draw on familiar systemic themes as they act in institutional and social contexts, provides insight to how patterns of marginalization manifest within and across institutions (Carspecken, 1996).

### **Analytical Framework**

This research assumes that LGBTQ students are marginalized in the school environment in various ways and that the teachers who support them negotiate the same systems of marginalization. Therefore, this study did not explore *if* teachers negotiate heteronormative structures in their professional practice, but *how*. By examining the experiences and perspectives of teacher allies, it was possible to access and explicate the social structures shaping the possibilities for educators' professional action in the interest of creating inclusive schools for LGBTQ students. For example, support for LGBTQ youth occurs in contexts where heteronormativity and binary gender identities are believed to be “normal” and, therefore, are dominant social positions. Participants' descriptions of their strategies for supporting these students involved negotiating the categories of “normal” and “different” students, and most participants had difficulties navigating the lines between normal and different, deciding how to categorize LGBTQ students, or deciding if they were supposed to recognize student differences or think of them as “the same” as everybody else. These perspectives are indicative of how heteronormativity stigmatizes gender and sexual differences, and they can be connected to existing scholarship on how educational and political discourses such as “diversity” (Ahmed, 2012) and “tolerance” (Brown, 2006) are shaping and limiting the possibilities for recognizing and valuing LGBTQ identities in school settings.

This analysis also drew on Linde's (1993) principle of *coherence* in the expression of social identity. Much like Carspecken's (1992) assertion that social identity is *communicative*—“people claim their identities through complex displays of behavior” (p. 64) which are interpreted by others—Linde (1993) argues that coherence of one's life story is achieved in communication with others and is dependent upon shared understanding of social norms defining a “good” person in a given context. Coherence is “a social obligation that must be fulfilled in

order for [social actors] to appear as competent members of their culture” (p. 16). In the context of researching teacher allies’ performance of professional identity, the question at hand is: “What coherence systems are teachers using to integrate the “ally” identity claim into a coherent “teacher” identity?” Conceptualizing teacher identity in terms of its communicative properties—and the conscious choices teachers make in communicating self to others—is important to this project because it sheds light on the professional (social) norms educators feel they must negotiate in order to be “intelligible” (Youdell, 2006) in the school context. The ways that educators engage with tacit social and professional expectations speaks to the kinds of professional action they believe are “allowed” in their respective contexts, their beliefs about professional responsibility, and the range of possibilities available to them to conceptualize the role of a teacher who describes herself as an ally for LGBTQ students.

### **Analysis Procedures**

While in the field, interview data were recorded with a digital recorder, and physical details of the interaction were recorded through handwritten field notes. Observation data was recorded through handwritten field notes. Interview data was transcribed into a Microsoft Word document by a transcription service, FoxTranscribe©. The researcher validated all interview transcriptions by listening to audio recordings of interviews and checking them against the transcript for verbatim accuracy. The researcher manually corrected any errors to ensure that all transcripts were as close to verbatim language as possible. Field notes were integrated into the transcript during this process, resulting in one Word document for each of the twenty-five interviews. Field notes were transcribed as soon as possible after leaving the observation site in order to maximize the accuracy of the transcription from notes to a word-processed narrative description. Verbatim language, approximate quotations, and paraphrased language were represented as such in the

typed field document. Extended field notes and observer comments were added to the handwritten details during this process to create an expanded account (Spradley, 1980) that included all recorded and recalled events as well as the researcher's analytical questions and speculations that occurred during the data collection and transcription processes. One Microsoft Word document was created for each of the fifty-five observations.

All transcripts and field notes were uploaded into RQDA, a qualitative data management system. Each document was read repeatedly, and the content of each field document was named using low-inference thematic codes. The codes included categories such as: student/teacher interactions, instructional decisions, behavior management decisions, educational history, professional history, teacher identity, ally identity, school context, classroom climate, and “diversity” talk—which included all interview or classroom language directly addressing gender or sexuality. This phase of coding served the purpose of dividing the large data set into more manageable sections. Once data was divided into these broad categories, the management system generated Microsoft Word documents containing the categorized data. The categorized data was re-read repeatedly and coded with a more detailed system of emergent coding. This process facilitated the identification of robust themes within and across the broad data categories. For example, it was discovered that concept of being “comfortable” was used in multiple contexts to define how participants wanted their students to feel in school, as well as how they wanted to feel themselves. Once this theme was identified, it became possible to examine how participants defined *comfortable*, how it functioned as a framework for making decisions about curriculum and classroom environment, and how they related it to the visions for optimal school environments for LGBTQ youth. It also became possible to identify recurring assumptions about LGBTQ youth identity, public education, “good” strategies for including diversity, and “good”



teaching that formed the “meaning horizon” (Carspecken, 1996) for teachers’ definitions of their identities and actions as allies for LGBTQ youth. Careful attention to the “meaning horizon” was important to this analysis because it generated insight to the various social norms at play in teachers’ performance of professional identity—with “ally” as part of that identity—and creation of classroom cultures that they believe to be safe, inclusive, supportive, and/or accepting for all students.

### **Subjectivity Statement**

The vision and execution of this study were shaped by my experiences as a teacher, a professional development facilitator, and a researcher. The year I began my first teaching job, I had conversations with queer-identified friends about their experiences in middle and high school, and in those conversations they not-so-gently insisted that it was important for me to pay attention to when and how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning students are targeted or marginalized in my school and classroom. I quickly discovered that, despite working in a high school that had a reputation of being “where all the gay kids go” and the only school in my district with a functioning Gay Straight Alliance, very few teachers made any attempt to interrupt homophobia in any way. Kids told me I was one of few teachers who wouldn’t allow them to say “that’s so gay” in class, and I witnessed multiple examples of the school’s failure to provide a safe, equitable environment for LGBTQ students to learn. I left teaching and entered this PhD program to learn about how and why oppression functions in K-12 schools and to pursue new opportunities to attack problems of inequality and schooling. I quickly became involved in leading professional development workshops about the school experiences of LGBTQ youth and interviewing educators about these PD experiences. In addition, I have had myriad opportunities to work on projects that pursued the goal of creating more equitable

educational policies and practices for LGBTQ youth at the state and local level. Throughout all of these experiences, the most pressing questions for me have been about how classroom teachers make meaning of LGBTQ students' needs and their roles in addressing those needs; how teachers integrate addressing the needs of LGBTQ students into the larger context of their professional practice; and how they navigate the stigma or resistance that may follow when educational practice acknowledges non-normative gender and sexual identities. Throughout the research process, I often felt the impulse to take on my role as professional development provider and work with teachers to help them understand, navigate, and possibly interrupt the patterns of marginalization that I could observe circulating in their classrooms. However, as my primary role as a researcher was to open myself to their perspectives and experiences, I instead focused my attention on recording the details of the time I spent observing and interviewing each participant.

The analysis and representation of this research data has certainly been shaped by my own experiences as a teacher and ally, as well as my belief that schools are places where significant social change is possible and teachers have the power to influence the ways their students experience school. My own teacher identity is relevant to this project as well, as I believe teachers are responsible for interrogating their own privilege and assumptions and should be invested in creating school environments that are as equitable as possible. However, I am also sensitive to the multiple ways that teachers have been disempowered in K-12 public schools and are often blamed for failures of the educational system. I made efforts to represent both give credence to the teachers' good intentions and critique the limitations of pedagogical approaches that do not adequately recognize the identities, experiences, and perspectives of LGBTQ students. This approach limited the possibilities for examining the extent to which teachers'

experiences, perspectives, and practices were entrenched in and reproducing heteronormativity, and such analysis will be the focus of future work with this data set.

### **Limitations**

This dissertation is limited in that it addresses the experiences of only nine educators in a single geographic region. The participant sample represented a wide variety of professional experiences, but it disproportionately represented the experiences of suburban educators. Therefore, it is likely that these findings over-represent the experiences of allies who teach in predominantly White, upper middle class, and “high achieving” schools. This limitation aligns with trends throughout scholarship in the field of LGBTQ issues in education, which disproportionately represents suburban schools and the needs of White students. In the future, more research is needed in urban and rural settings to diversify the field’s knowledge about how heteronormativity functions in school environments and possibilities for successfully interrupting the marginalization of LGBTQ youth. Additionally, the fact that only White educators responded to the Invitation to Participate has drawn attention to the need to pursue diversified and creative participant recruitment strategies that are specifically focused on diversifying the participant pool.

Another limitation of this research is number of observation hours that were completed in each teacher’s classroom. Although these observations provided valuable insight to how teachers connect the idea of a safe or comfortable classroom to their daily routines, specific analyses of how heteronormative privilege manifests in allies’ classrooms is superficial due to the limited amount of time spent in each teacher’s classes. Long-term ethnographic research would result in a more robust representation of the persistence of heteronormativity in allies’ classrooms, as well as moments of disruption.

A regrettable limitation of this research is the lack of data related to supporting transgender youth in school contexts. Participants did not talk about being allies for transgender students, and references to the presence of diverse gender expressions and identities in the school environment were brief and superficial. Wider observation access and more time in each research site would potentially increase opportunities to learn if and how gender non-conforming and transgender students are recognized in the school environment. Expanded observation would also increase opportunities to collect data representing patterns of privilege and oppression specifically related to gender identity and expression. Additionally, participant recruitment that specifically requests teachers who have experience with transgender students is likely necessary.

Finally, the analysis procedures for this study did not push systems analysis far enough to draw definitive conclusions about how educators' practices and perspectives are both reflective of heteronormative culture and reproducing the patterns of marginalization that make "ally" work necessary in the first place. In other words, this dissertation failed to fully engage with questions of how participants are complicit in the reproduction of heteronormativity, how they perpetuate instructional patterns that do not recognize gender and sexual diversity in the classroom, and how their privilege as White, straight, middle class women functions as a protective barrier between them and direct engagement with the marginalization that many of their students experience. Future work with this data, as well as future research projects, will need to engage these more critical questions in order to move the field toward more radical efforts to achieve inclusion and recognition for LGBTQ youth in U.S. public schools.

#### **Chapter 4: TEACHER ALLY IDENTITY**

Participants' discussions of ally identity or their actions as allies for LGBTQ youth were situated within broader professional identity narratives. Through these narratives, they described their positions and responsibilities within their professional contexts, visions for optimal classroom cultures, roles in creating safe learning environments, decisions about curriculum and classroom management, and relationships with students. Participants defined themselves as good teachers first, and being an ally for LGBTQ youth was one of many ways that they supported the learning and development of all students. Previous scholarship on teachers' engagement with LGBTQ students and educational issues indicate that teachers do not consider visible support for LGBTQ students or directly addressing gender and sexual diversity to be a taken-for-granted part of their professional responsibilities (Bower & Klecka, 2009; Vega, Crawford, & Van Pelt, 2012), and they often rationalize this work through educational discourses of school safety (Fredman, Schultz, & Hoffman, 2013; Payne & Smith, 2012; Smith, in press) and unconditional care for students (Jimenez, 2009; Smith, in press). These discourses also shape the possibilities educators envision for creating inclusive learning environments. In the context of this study—which specifically sought self-identified allies and was approved by all participants' school leadership—teachers referenced these discourses to explain why teachers should support LGBTQ students, and their interpretations of good teacher ally practice were shaped by these dominant narratives about how to accommodate difference in school settings.

This chapter will build on this previous scholarship by exploring two categories of participants' professional identity narratives: "Who I am as a teacher (ally)" and "How I perceive my (LGBTQ) students." Teacher allies' professional identity narratives are significant to the overall project of disrupting LGBTQ youth marginalization because they provide insight to how

they define (a) the roles they can or should take as teachers and allies of LGBTQ youth, (b) the needs and school experiences of LGBTQ youth, and (c) the possibilities for more equitable schools. These narratives also lend insight to how educators understand “who” LGBTQ students are within the context of an entire student population. Participants used language of *sameness versus difference* and *at-risk students* throughout these narratives as their tools for positioning LGBTQ students in relation to their own social positions, to the norm of the heterosexual gender conforming student, and within broader conceptualizations of *school diversity*. This “who” is a key element for understanding how educators approached the work of supporting LGBTQ students in school spaces, and it provides insight to how much value is being placed on students’ gender and sexuality differences.

### **Who I am as a Teacher (Ally)**

The teachers who participated in this project unequivocally agreed that LGBTQ students have a right to equal access to education and that teachers play an important role in providing school environments where they have the same opportunities to learn as their peers. However, none of the participants directly stated, “I am an ally” at any time during the research process, and their narratives about support for LGBTQ students or attitudes about LGBTQ inclusion typically avoided direct references to the gender and sexual identities of their students. Participants did not speak about systemic marginalization of LGBTQ students or the possibility that teachers could participate in disrupting patterns of exclusion at an institutional level. Instead, they connected their intent and efforts to support LGBTQ students to statements of professional identity and responsibility. Through these statements, they presented themselves as good teachers and distinguished themselves from colleagues who do not share their skills and values. Interviews covered a wide range of topics—curriculum, classroom management and

climate, school culture, relationships with students—and participants generally incorporated LGBTQ youth into their professional identity narratives when they stated their beliefs about school diversity, their approaches to developing rapport and relationships with their students, and their visions for safe or inclusive classroom culture. These narrative connections indicate that teachers understood the work of supporting LGBTQ students in terms of meeting the needs of individual students within the context of their own classrooms—they wished to communicate their acceptance to any LGBTQ students in their classes, get to know those students, and provide learning environments where these students will not be targets of intolerance or harassment. Significantly, such frameworks do not require direct engagement with gender and sexual diversity—what it is or how to make it a valued component of school culture—nor do they require teachers to examine how and why LGBTQ students are marginalized throughout the school environment. They do, however, provide a glimpse into teachers’ perceptions of what their professional contexts will allow them to do.

When participants described how and why they have presented themselves as allies for their LGBTQ students, they used language of diversity and tolerance both in their professional identity claims (i.e., “I am open” or “I accept all students”) and their descriptions of how they present themselves as allies to their students. Further, all nine participants referred to their responsibility to educate all students. This “open to all students” framework for supporting LGBTQ students simultaneously (a) named LGBTQ students in the teachers’ understanding of who attends their schools and might be sitting in their classrooms; and (b) constructed LGBTQ students as a category within “an impressive range of potential objects of tolerance, including cultures, races, ethnicities, sexualities, ideologies, lifestyle and fashion choices, political positions, religions, and even regimes” (Brown, 2006, p. 3). In other words, the teachers’

narratives of professional responsibility to “all students” included the needs of LGBTQ youth, which indicates that this group was indeed included in how the teachers understood and made decisions concerning the possible needs, perspectives, experiences, and identities of their students. The “all students” framework also served as a mechanism for the participants to distance themselves from speaking about gender or sexuality. By speaking about their generalized approaches to meeting the needs of all and being open to all student identities, they were able to include LGBTQ students in their professional narratives without *naming* LGBTQ students or only mentioning them briefly.

**Responsibility to all students.** Professional responsibility to educate all students was frequently invoked throughout the study as rationale for why educators should pay attention to LGBTQ discrimination. Their professional identity statements reflected this commitment to embracing diversity in the student population: participants paired their talk about participating in the study, being an ally, or being a good teacher for LGBTQ students with statements about supporting and accepting “everybody,” “whatever you are.” As Mayo argues, “considering what ‘all’ students means in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity can help schools broaden their scope of address, the inclusiveness of their climate, and the effectiveness of their teaching” (Mayo, 2014, p. 19). In the context of this research, lumping LGBTQ students into a catch-all category of “all students” illustrated their claims of competence to meet the needs of LGBTQ students to the degree that they are like any other teenager—all students need teachers who will not judge them for their individual quirks and personalities, they want to feel that their teachers value their presence in the classroom, and they need teachers who will invest in their learning.

Some participants presented this professional responsibility to educate “all students” as their primary rationale for volunteering for the study. Molly and Laura were the two participants



who spoke the least about gender identity or sexual orientation in their interviews, and neither described the work of a supportive teacher or explained their interest in the study in a way that directly addressed the needs or experiences of LGBTQ youth. Laura was hesitant to volunteer because she did not believe she held the requisite expertise, but her commitment to supporting all students eventually led her to participate:

I saw the email<sup>18</sup> [inviting teachers to participate] a long time ago when [the principal] first—when you must have first contacted him. And I was like, “Hmm, well, hmm. Should I? Well I don’t know. Well... I don’t know anything about this [LGBTQ students]!” I mean I try to be supportive of every student regardless of their background and I don’t really know if this is – if I have anything to offer. (Interview 1, 11/15/11)

Despite not having specific examples of support for LGBTQ students, her commitment to all students “regardless of their background” created the possibility that research on teacher support for LGBTQ students would include her. LGBTQ students may not have been previously included in her understanding of the possibilities for student diversity in her classroom, but she experienced a connection to the idea—albeit uncertain—when she read the description of the project. Significantly, lacking specialized knowledge does not lead her to doubt that she is a good teacher to LGBTQ students. Her uncertainty is about whether or not she can contribute to a research project that is specifically investigating gender and sexual diversity. Molly also connected to the study through the broader understandings of being inclusive of diversity:

Well, I would like to think I have a welcoming and respectful environment for all, for all students. So I don't really, I didn't really think about it as, like, "Oh, I'm really good with that population" so I should do the study. I just, I think I, um, I'm just, I just try to let

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<sup>18</sup> Invitation to Participate. Appendix A.

every kid, no matter who they are, um, have the same opportunity to learn. So I wasn't really thinking about that [working with LGBTQ students]. (Interview 1, 11/28/11)

Molly resisted the implication (i.e. researcher's assumption) that she had considered the specific needs of LGBTQ students, her own knowledge about these students' experiences, or her experiences working with these students when she decided to volunteer for the study. Instead she provided "welcoming and respectful environment for all" as explanation for her connection to the research project, as this broad commitment would qualify her to contribute to a project about any group of students. This description of her classroom culture reflected common vocabulary of multicultural or diversity education, such as addressing difference with "sensitivity," "tolerance," and providing learning environments where different identity groups comfortably coexist (Gorski, 2009, p. 316). This common model for educating diverse student groups emphasizes the importance of tolerant attitudes but does not necessarily require that students' specific identity differences would need to be directly addressed in the classroom. Molly positioned herself as the possessor and moderator of "a welcoming and respectful environment"—which indicates she understood herself to have power to provide this educational asset to students who are at risk of feeling unwelcome or disrespected in school. Like Laura, she did not share any specific narratives about experiences with LGBTQ students, but her self-identification as a teacher who supports "all students" encompassed the possibility that this could include current LGBTQ students whose identities are not known to her or who she may teach in the future.

Participants who spoke more specifically about their support for LGBTQ students or had specific experiences of working with this group of students also situated support for LGBTQ students into broader diversity frameworks. That is, they also understood their support for LGBTQ students to be within broader attempts to support "all students" and they were able to

provide examples of how this approach (actually or hypothetically) allowed them to connect with an LGBTQ student or teach tolerance for LGBTQ identities. For example, when Kelly discussed her vision for a teacher ally's role in creating LGBTQ-inclusive school environments, she speculated how her existing strategies for meeting the needs of all will encompass the needs of LGBTQ students:

I guess I don't know that it's any different for, you know, a student who is gay, transgendered, et cetera, you know, as compared to my role for any other student...[A]t the end of the day I want to be the teacher that can be there. If somebody needs me I want to be able to be there for whatever, whatever the issue is. Maybe you're having a sports issue, maybe you're gay and you need to come out, whatever. Maybe your dad beats your mom. You know, I want...If you need to talk about it, whatever it is I want to be there to help support even if it's just someone to listen. (Interview 3, 6/11/12)

Kelly named "gay, transgendered, et cetera" identities in her discussion of support for students, but she still used the "all students" framework to maintain distance from direct discussion of gender identity or sexual orientation. Kelly identified herself as a trusted teacher who is willing and available to listen to individual students' problems, and she believed this part of her professional practice was particularly relevant to the needs of LGBTQ students. She listed three possible issues that students may need to talk about that represented the range of issues she had encountered before or imagined addressing in the future. Significantly, these examples are all experiences that she imagined would cause students emotional distress. Thus, she placed the needs of LGBTQ youth alongside those of students who experience social tension or familial trauma. Her caring intentions encompassed a diverse range of issues that students could present

to her, and she imagined LGBTQ students as individuals who were likely to need teacher support to navigate possible stress or adversity in order to be successful in school.

**Language of openness.** A second way that teachers presented themselves as good teachers for LGBTQ students was to describe themselves using the word *open*. Like the “all students” framework, the language of openness aligns with dominant discourses of safety and tolerance because it categorizes LGBTQ students as vulnerable youth waiting for acceptance or protection from those who are in a position to grant it (Hackford-Peer, 2010). Heterosexual teachers possess both social and institutional privilege that allows them to decide to express and promote openness, but the participants in this study did not recognize that such expressions do not disrupt the systemic marginalization that distances LGBTQ youth from the “normative centre” of school culture (Youdell, 2006, p. 12). They understood *open* to be both worldview and professional practice that could challenge discrimination and harassment targeting LGBTQ students. Langmann (2010) argues that multicultural and tolerance discourses “trade on a welcome and openness to ‘diversity’” (p. 338), and the prevalence of this language in participants’ interviews suggests that “open” has come to be a valued term in schools as educators experience increased pressure to provide safe environments and accept student differences.

*“Open” equals “acceptance.”* The word *open* has the metaphorical effect of suggesting a willingness to welcome a wide range of possibilities into one’s life, and the word recurred over and over again when participants spoke about the qualities or actions LGBTQ students need from their teachers. When participants described themselves as “open,” they presented themselves as teachers who have inclusive and welcoming attitudes about the full range of difference that will potentially present themselves in public school classrooms. The word *open* also indicated

recognition that some differences are more readily welcomed than others. Participants used this word to indicate awareness that LGBTQ identities are subject to stigma and discrimination and to present themselves as good educators who do not hold negative attitudes. For example, when Kelly was asked the question “What does it mean to you to be a teacher who is supportive of LGBTQ students,” she presented *openness* as a quality that made it possible for her to relate to her students in a way that would create positive classroom experiences for LGBTQ students:

I guess I, um, I’m pretty accepting of everyone. Like, I really don’t care what your sexual orientation is, what your religion is, you know, what your activities are on the weekends, you know? It doesn’t really matter to me. So I feel like in general I’m a pretty accepting person so I figured, well, maybe I’ll see, you know, does some--, does an outsider truly get that impression from my classroom? Like, am I truly supporting students as much as I think I am? Um, you know, cause I, I feel that open about things, so I hope other people get that message and that they feel like they can be who they are in this class. (Interview 1, 11/14/11)

Kelly used the word *open* to explain her belief that there are many student differences that should not “matter” to their teachers. Kelly described her feelings and attitudes toward students as “in general...pretty accepting” and “open”—which are both qualities that communicate willingness to educate and develop relationships with all students regardless of identity. She claimed she does not “care” or hold negative attitudes about students’ sexual orientation, religion, or weekend activities, which are all student characteristics that may attract judgment, disagreement, or disparaging reactions from peers or other teachers. Instead, she intended to support her students by communicating that she is “open about things” and that they can “be who they are in this class,” and she hoped to communicate these messages in a way that an “outsider” (such as

the researcher) would notice. Here, the logic of openness is that LGBTQ students need learning environments where they are safe to “be who they are” rather than spend time and energy pretending they are someone else. Kelly’s logic of openness also assumed that expressions of individuality would not “matter” or be relevant to her regular teaching practices because she will respect and educate all students, regardless of identity. So, while her openness does important work in the interest of providing a classroom context where all will hopefully feel respected and valued, expressing openness neither disrupts LGBTQ students’ marginalized positions as individuals to whom openness must be extended nor considers the possibility that a student’s gender or sexual identity is relevant to day-to-day classroom operations.

Kelly and Susan used similar word choice and similar logic in their descriptions of open teachers’ action and attitudes. Susan presented “open” and “accepting” as similar terms, using both to indicate willingness to welcome any category of student difference into their classrooms. Her use of this language indicated that she had also shaped her responsibilities as a teacher ally around the logic that LGBTQ students need open teachers because they need school spaces where they have freedom of expression without fear of homophobic targeting.

I’d say it’s [an ally is] a person, like I said, being open. Not judging. And just kind of your lifestyle. You know, like, if you are somebody who’s going to make comments that are inappropriate in your life, then you’re going to make them in the classroom. You know, so it kind of comes down to being an accepting person. I would say. Because that person is going to be accepting in the classroom, you know? It’s just not in my vocabulary to say, “that’s so gay.” So, I would never say that. I wouldn’t say it outside of school, and I wouldn’t say it in school, and it bothers me when I hear people who are saying [it] outside of school in my personal life, you know? Just as much as it bothers me

in the hallway at school. So, I think stuff like that, you know, it comes down to just kind of the person you are. If you're an accepting person, then you are that role. You accept everybody. Any difference. (Interview 3, 6/21/12)

Both Kelly and Susan presumed the possibility for stigma, exclusion, or discrimination to affect LGBTQ students, and these possibilities were in the background of how they both defined *open* and imagined the action they should take as open teachers. Susan extended the concept of *open* beyond the boundaries of the school and argued that a person's choice to use biased language at any time would indicate she is not authentically open to LGBTQ or other marginalized identities. Because she is consistent in both her personal and professional life, the openness she expresses in school is more trustworthy than that of colleagues who may only express tolerance towards LGBTQ students as an act of professionalism. Additionally, both teachers distanced themselves from the possibility of judging LGBTQ students because of their differences. Kelly separated herself from this type of moral judgment through her claims that students' gender and sexual identities do not "matter" to her, and Susan defined *open* as "not judging" and claimed she "would never" engage in judgmental, overtly homophobic behavior such as saying "that's so gay" in school or in her personal life. Their emphases on the importance of avoiding judgment is significant because it is indicative of the persistent heteronormative definitions of LGBTQ identities as perverse, morally deviant, immoral, or indecent—and therefore subject to moral critique. Kelly and Susan claimed that they would never make these kinds of moral judgments, but their interpretations of LGBTQ students' needs and experiences were still shaped by a history of LGBTQ people being interpreted as deviant or morally inferior to heterosexual peers (Mayo, 2004). That is, these teachers were responding to something they subconsciously "know" about LGBTQ identities when they make claims about avoiding judgment, and as long as this

knowledge circulates through the culture, LGBTQ students will remain in subordinate, stigmatized social positions.

Although participants' discussions of openness included resistance to heteronormative marking of LGBTQ identity as *deviant*, they remained caught in the trap of normalization that constructs clear distinctions between "normal" and "Other." These language traps were examples of how educators were attentive to individuals' experiences but not to how heteronormative legacies are present and reproduced throughout school culture—and through their own language. As was illustrated in Kelly and Susan's narratives, teachers rejected the possibility of judging LGBTQ students without questioning how these identities came to be known as deviant or how such labels function in school or the broader culture. Other teachers who spoke about being open and accepting teachers were similarly caught in the trap of referring to and relating to LGBTQ students as the unfamiliar Other, despite their best efforts to be inclusive. For example, when Paula was asked what draws LGBTQ students to some teachers over others, her response characterized LGBTQ identities as a something new or different that older colleagues may not understand or want to acknowledge: "They [my gay students] assume that if you're younger you're more liberal. You're more open to those kind of new ideas" (Interview 3, 6/18/12). Paula presented liberalism as a quality that was assumed to be generational and that signaled she would be more likely to accept them than older, presumably conservative teachers. Mainstream political discourse characterizes liberal citizens to be interested in equal rights for all, while conservatives resist policy changes like gay marriage because they threaten traditional values or ways of life such as heteronormative family structure. By describing LGBTQ issues and identities as "new ideas," she suggested that the presence, visibility, or rights of these students had yet to be institutionalized in the school community. However, this description of her position as an "open"



teacher also reproduced the idea that LGBTQ students were a strange, unfamiliar “other” waiting to be accepted by the rest of the school community. Another participant, Karen, used the language of being “okay” with LGBTQ students rather than saying “open,” but like other participants she wanted to avoid imposing moral judgment on students.

So, I would, I would like to be the teacher that, or one of those teachers that people know, you know, “she’s okay.” You know. It, you know, “She, she won’t, she won’t be mean to you. She’ll accept you. She’ll make you feel like you’re, you’re a decent person.”

Karen’s narrative named some of the injurious possibilities for an LGBTQ students in school, including the possibility that these youth would begin to question their own self-worth after experiencing cruelty, intolerance, or moral regulation. As a teacher who was “okay,” she aimed to express kindness and acceptance to students, tell them she thinks LGBTQ people are good people—not deviant or immoral as some may believe—and serve as a point of respite from a hostile school environment.

Participants who used “openness” language to talk about support for LGBTQ students occurred through individualized narratives about what they as allies could do to support individual students they know in the school. As a result, their narratives reflected one-direction relationship of privileged teachers offering openness to marginalized students with the intention of meeting their immediate personal and educational needs. This framework is a product of the dominant approaches to creating safer schools for LGBTQ youth: they focus on the action they as privileged individuals can take in the interest of caring for the marginalized, which results in attention to specific differences that make students vulnerable to harassment but lack of engagement with—or even awareness of—how heteronormativity and stigma circulate through a school and shape their own understanding of how LGBTQ students are positioned in the school.

*Opening points.* In addition to being open and accepting of diverse identities, participants believed that LGBTQ students needed teachers who were open to having difficult conversations with students. Participants spoke about being teachers who create “opening points” or avenues for students to communicate with them about issues beyond academics. They believed that making personal connections with students was an important part of being a successful teacher, and they took responsibility for showing students that they were open to those relationships, committed to earning students’ trust, and available for help any time a student needs it. While these strategies were assumed to be necessary for successfully connecting with adolescent students in general, LGBTQ students were assumed to be even more in need of positive, trusting relationships with teachers due to the stigmatization of their identities and the resulting risk for bullying, harassment, family rejection, depression, substance use, or suicide. “Open,” therefore, took on a dual meaning when these teaching practices were connected to LGBTQ students: teachers used the word to describe themselves as teachers who expressed acceptance to LGBTQ people, and they used it to describe ways of building relationships with students that were intended to create possibilities for students to tell trusted adults when they needed help or support.

Eight of the nine participants perceived that students felt safer, more comfortable, or happier in their classrooms than in others’, and they believed their students were more open with them about their lives and identities than with other teachers or in other school spaces. Teachers’ experiences around student’ ability to talk to them were typically stories of students “hanging out” in their classrooms before or after school or students specifically seeking a space where they could be honest about their experiences and trusted their teacher would be honest in return. Paula

taught in the same school as her father, and she compared her own relationships with students to his:

[My dad has said,] “I can't believe the kids come in and hang out with you the way they do and talk to you the way they do.” You know...I would never do that. *I would never do that to a teacher [when I was a student].* Dad's like, “No kids would ever do that with me.” And I just, you know...I think the kids seem comfortable. They want to tell me things and they want... they ask me questions. And I just and I just think that a positive that they feel like they can come and help, get help. (Paula, Interview 2, 3/15/12)

Paula believed that her own experiences of developing relationships with students, helping them navigate problems, and showing them support were significant or special because they were so different from her own high school experiences and from what she knew about her father's teaching life. By reporting her father's disbelief and contrasting her teaching experiences with her own memories of being a student, she implies that the relationships she has developed with students are not what she anticipated. She interprets this surprise professional experience as a “good thing” and is willing to accept the role of a teacher who students seek when they need to “get help.” Other teachers illustrated their claims that students trust them, want to talk to them, or experience them as “safe,” teachers by describing situations when students have come to them to seek advice, share their experiences, or simply use their classroom as a place to spend their unstructured school time.

Around lunch time the girls came to me about ten of them and they said, “Mrs. X can we come in here? We need to talk to you,” I said, “To me? Why?” and they said, “About what happened in [another teacher's class]” and Rebecca<sup>19</sup>...said, “We need to talk to you because you will listen to us and you will tell us the truth and we need a safe place to

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<sup>19</sup> All student names are pseudonyms

go where we can do all that.” And I said, “Okay, come in. We’ll shut the door, it’ll be, it’s lunch time. We’ll talk it all out.” And we did. (Megan, Interview 1, 3/8/12)

I get a lot of kids in after school that come in just to hang out. They just need a place to go, they need to complain about something their mom did last night or, you know, their brother. Um, a lot of time I’ll get kids that come after and they’ll say, “Oh my god, you know, you wouldn’t believe what happened this weekend!” And they’ll run through this story, you know, this fight they had with their friend, which is probably something stupid. You know, but just I think having someone there to listen and, you know...So I guess I don’t know how I’m getting there, but I do feel like many of my students do feel like they can come here. (Kelly, Interview 1, 11/14/11)

These examples are indicative of participants’ beliefs that it is important for students to have trusted adults in the school environment, and they illustrate participants’ claims that they have been successful in positioning themselves as teachers who are receptive to non-academic conversations with their students. Megan’s narrative creates an image of a teacher who will listen to students’ perspectives and is trusted to respond with honest, sincere feedback that will help them navigate their problems. Kelly’s narrative indicates that she perceives her classroom to be a place where students want to spend time, and she believes her students have interpreted her as a teacher who is interested in their lives beyond school. All three presented their relationships with students as evidence of their success as teachers who care for and are interested in knowing their students.

Participants who were invested in being open and available for their students attempted to communicate this by taking it on themselves to establish community norms that would signal to

students that it was expected and valuable to share personal experiences. One of Kelly's professional goals was to "truly ma[k]e a connection with every kid by the end of the year," and her primary strategy for accomplishing this was sharing personal details about her own life with students: "I try to talk a lot about me." She believed this created lines of communication "because I find that the more they know about me, the more they feel they can relate to me." Shortly before her second interview (March 2012), a student told Kelly he was gay. She recounted the episode in her second and third interviews, and when asked how she thought her teaching practice made it possible for this student to confide in her, she responded:

I think, um, I don't know. I mean...I'm a pretty, like, open, accepting you know person, and that pretty much goes for all aspects of my life. I mean, there are certain things I don't agree with. Like I don't think that 15-year-old kids should be doing cocaine. I don't really think anyone should be doing cocaine. You know, and like, things like that I, you know, um, I will voice my opinion on that. You know, obviously it's their choice to make. But, um, I don't know. I think I'm pretty open. I think they know I'm pretty open and I think I get to know them. Or at least I try to get to know them on a personal level early on in the year. Um, but I don't know. I don't know if other teachers just have more of that, "I'm the teacher and I don't need to know who you are as a person I just need to know what your grade is in the book." You know? 'Cause I think that there are teachers like that. Um, so, I guess, I guess I don't know. I don't know. I mean I'm glad he felt comfortable telling me and I'm glad that we had that relationship. (Interview 3, 6/11/12)

Although she was not sure, Kelly believed that her broad acceptance of student identities and beliefs and her willingness to share details about her own life created the possibility for a student to tell her he is gay. Significantly, Kelly never spoke about the possibility of mentioning LGBTQ

identities or support for LGBTQ rights in the classroom setting, which suggests her students may not have witnessed her explicitly advocate for LGBTQ acceptance. Instead, she emphasized the significance of her student relationships. Kelly believed she related to her students differently than her colleagues do to theirs because she defined her professional identity to extend beyond the “teacher” role of developing students’ academic knowledge. She remained committed to her academic responsibilities, but she also believed there was a wide scope of possibilities for things teachers and students could talk about that reach beyond academic issues. She believed this challenged more traditional ideas about the kinds of relationships teachers and kids could have. She has created relationships where students come to her about “other things,” which resulted in opportunities for her to provide social and emotional support in addition to academic support. This would not be possible if she did not position herself as a teacher who was interested in students’ personal lives and willing to play a role in helping them learn to navigate the experiences that led them to seek out an open, trusted adult.

When Megan described her opportunities across her career, she emphasized that she had developed a reputation as a teacher who kids could talk to about anything. She claimed that kids told her things they might not tell other teachers, and she believed this was because she made a point to listen to and respect their feelings and points of view. She also believed it was important to “never lie to children” because being caught in a lie is how teachers lose their credibility with their students—thus closing down possibilities for developing teacher/student relationships.

When I, well, when we talk about things in class, about, like, what kids are good at or not good at and this and that, I think that most teachers do not like to share with students that they’re not good at things. Okay? Because I think that most teachers believe, I think that most *adults* believe—that if children know that they’re not perfect at everything, they’re

going to think less of them. I've never felt this way, so I share with kids how...I've gone through life being very, very bad at math. In fact, I really think I had a math disability that was never, never picked up on. And I shared with them a story that happened to me in school when I was in high school, and I was a Regents student in high school. I had a math teacher tell me, "You're not smart enough to go to college because you're not going to pass the Trig Regents." (Interview 1, 3/18/12)

Megan believed in the value of sharing her own experiences and vulnerabilities with her students. She rejected the idea that adults surrender authority or respectability when students know about their flaws, and she believed that credibility and trust come from honest conversations—which may include adults admitting to their own weaknesses and mistakes and experiences of feeling like they were not smart enough to be successful in school. Sharing such information with students can become opening points for connection and communication that do not exist when teachers understand their professional position as that of a knowledgeable other or unquestioned authority figure. Megan believed that this kind of honesty was significant to the social dynamic in her classes, because students came to her to ask questions or discuss problems that she believed they would not discuss with other adults.

Rachel was the participant who had the most experience working directly with LGBTQ students, and like other participants she believed that there was a considerable amount of work to do to open lines of communication with students. During an interview she said she has so many LGBTQ students in her classroom before and after school that "you would think that I did the Gay Straight Alliance" (Interview 2, 6/19/12). Her interviews contained numerous reflections about how she came to be the "point person" (Interview 1, 4/3/12) for many gay kids in her

school, and she believed that her overall demeanor was fundamental to her success in creating these “opening points” for LGBTQ students:

I feel like I’m a very easy person to talk to...I, I use humor. I, I do not, uh, I do not come down hard on kids. Like, if, if at the beginning of the year they can’t get supplies, like, I just make all that work. You know what I mean? And I set up, I try to just set up a room where everybody understands that my goal is that you’re learning this material. I’m going to work very hard to get you there um, and, that’s that in terms of, of academics.

Um...and I also ask kids a lot about themselves, which I think opens the door, you know?

Rachel began and ended her list of strategies for creating a classroom environment—and a teacher/student dynamic—that is comfortable and non-threatening with “easy to talk to” and “ask kids...about themselves.” This identity claim and illustrative example of teaching practice were presented in close relation to goal of “open[ing] the door” for students to talk to her and creating space for students to share their lives and experiences with her. Additionally, she believed using humor and patience to deal with minor behavior infractions was significant to how she connected with her students. During every class observation, there were examples of Rachel using jokes and teasing to correct student behavior (tardiness, talking) instead of “coming down hard on kids.” Further, her statement, “I do not come down hard on kids” is an identity claim that positions her in contrast to colleagues who would impose harsh consequences for something like coming to school without supplies. One example of a teacher/student interaction that reflects this philosophy is Rachel’s response to a student who returned to school after being absent for several weeks:

A male student came in late. A kid looked at him and said, “Oh my god.” Rachel: “Rob!

So glad to see you back after your 3 week hiatus!” Rob said, “It’s not my fault.” Rachel:



“Yes, it was your fault.” She got up and handed him [materials for the current lesson].

Rob said hi to some of his classmates. Rachel to a male student: “Loan your buddy a slice of paper so he can do his work.” She also told Rob, “You made my Friday.” She told him they will need to talk at the end of class because (laughing) “I need you to pass this marking period, so we’ll need to work something out.” (field notes, 6/1/12)

In this teacher/student interaction, Rachel’s balanced holding the student accountable for his actions and expressing genuine respect and affection for the student. Extended absences make it difficult for students to pass their classes, and many teachers would say that the student had been absent too long and passing the course would be impossible. When Rob returned to school, Rachel welcomed him, dismissed his attempt to avoid responsibility, engaged him in the lesson, and stated her expectation that he will do enough work to earn credit for the course. The student was given the opportunity to immediately re-engage in school and she communicated the message that she expected students to correct their mistakes, but she did not “come down hard on him” or want him to leave because of bad decisions. She believed students trust her care and respect for them—even in these moments.

Rachel was the one participant who talked specifically about how LGBTQ students come to know which teachers will support them. Rather than speak only about strategies that are intended to open communication with all students, she also acknowledged the possibility that LGBTQ students need to see “opening points” specifically related to gender and sexuality if they are going to trust their teachers. For this reason, she made a point to include LGBTQ students’ experiences in her classroom rituals and traditions or her daily conversations with students:

I think my role is to make every kid feel 100% equally represented. So, so, the things that I would typically do to show kids, to open up the door is...I put pictures of all my

students on my wall. If you go to...if it's a girl going with a girl to the prom I have no issue with it. That goes on my wall. If it's a boy going with a boy, no issue with it. I have no issue with asking students, you know, like they make up and break up 500 times and they'll come in to talk. I have no issue with, with saying like, you know, "How's your girlfriend?" or "What did you guys do this weekend?" or whatever as much as I would say to anybody. (Interview 2, 6/19/12)

Rachel believed that the "wall of fame" was significant to her students' experiences of inclusion and affirmation in her classroom and one of her annual rituals for expressing her affection and respect for her students:

Rachel's "wall of fame" collages covered wall that right behind her desk, which was in the front right corner of the classroom. I was observing from the back of the classroom room, but I could see that the collages were composed of candid photographs, professional school pictures, and Prom or Homecoming portraits. (Observation, 5/17/12)

Rachel introduced the concept of *equal representation* as the framework for her approach to meeting the needs of a diverse student population. The Wall of Fame in Rachel's classroom was placed in a prominent, visible location, and it contained collages she makes every school year using pictures of her students. She cited it as an example of how she makes all her students feel "100% equally represented" and how she "open[s] up the door" to students who experience stigma and exclusion: "I think that's [an] opening point, because I have so many pictures of students that do identify as gay and other kids know that." (Interview 1, 4/3/12) So, by including items like LGBTQ students' prom pictures in her collages she showed them the same care and respect as she would gender conforming and heterosexual students. New students who do not know *her* can look at the Wall of Fame and connect her to the LGBTQ kids they know in the

pictures. She has had close relationships with gay students that started with them asking her questions about former students in her pictures. Knowing she cares for and respects their gay friends creates comfort and trust between her and new students:

And I think, I think just once they're comfortable, students will come to you. And I think they do look for people who aren't going to judge them that don't mind hearing about...you know, they have bad dates or bad experiences just like the next one.

(Interview 1, 4/3/12)

Once students have recognized one of Rachel's "opening points," they start to talk to her about relationship problems, problems with friends and family, and other "normal." Like other participants, she identified the issue of (non)judgment as key to forming a relationship with an LGBTQ student, as well as the need to demonstrate that she is open to ("don't mind") hearing about experiences that are specifically related to being a gay high school student because they are not so different from the experiences of any "normal" high school student. Rachel had an awareness that this openness is not something an LGBTQ student can take for granted, and she positioned herself in opposition to educators who would reject LGBTQ youth or close themselves off from the students' experiences.

**Language of Diversity and Tolerance.** Teachers' professional identity claims around issues of diversity and social justice are significant because they lend insight to the possibilities they envision for being good, successful educators for marginalized students as well as how they understand the problems they are trying to address through their teaching practice. Throughout the interviews, participants responded to questions about how they supported LGBTQ students by describing themselves as open and accepting teachers who were committed to meeting the needs of all students. They believed these specific qualities were important because LGBTQ

students are known to experience discrimination and harassment; therefore, they need teachers who will not judge them, will allow them to be themselves, and will provide environments that are free of discrimination. The consistency of these perspectives throughout the data suggests that these are narratives of inclusive education that fulfill commonly held expectations for meeting student needs and accommodating student differences. Further, they are narratives that uphold and reproduce the values and expectations embedded in dominant discourses of safety, tolerance, and diversity. For example, situating LGBTQ students within a broader category of “all students” represents definitions of diversity management that call for emphasizing sameness as opposed to valuing difference (Brown, 2006). Teachers’ repeated use of the word *open* to describe themselves as effective teachers for LGBTQ students are indicative of how the tolerance discourse calls for addressing bias by eliminating hostility or judgment from intergroup interactions (Mayo, 2001). Throughout, they recounted individualized approaches to the problem of LGBTQ marginalization, which focused on repairing individual victims and securing their emotional and physical safety. These strategies focus on discrimination that occurs within the context of individual relationships—family rejection, social exclusion and bullying, teacher judgment—and position teachers to lessen the effects of discrimination by becoming people who will provide respite from these injurious experiences.

To be sure, LGBTQ students should be included and recognized within broad definitions of school diversity, and their chances for school success are certainly increased by teachers who are open, aware of the possibility that LGBTQ students will be in their classes, and treat them with respect. National campaigns in the United States such as GLSEN’s Safe Space program advocate for this kind of action all the time. But the danger of these methods is that they focus on ending violence and increasing tolerance as the desired outcomes of school climate or safe

schools work, rather than as necessary steps in pursuit of greater equity. The existing body of research on gender-based aggression (Anagnostopoulos, 2009; Bortolin, 2010; Chambers, et al., 2004; Eliasson, et al., 2007; Faris & Felmlee, 2011; Meyer, 2007; Pascoe, 2007) and heteronormative school spaces (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Mayo, 2014; Meyer, 2007; Ngo, 2003; Payne & Smith, 2013), as well as the growing number of critiques of safety and tolerance discourses as they specifically apply to LGBTQ students' school experiences (Hackford-Peer, 2010; Payne & Smith, 2012; Ringrose & Renold, 2010; Walton, 2011), highlight the need to focus change efforts on how heterosexuality and idealized binary gender performances are privileged throughout the school—and how these norms for “normal” or “successful” gender and sexuality are relevant to *all* students' school experiences. Such equity work would require schools to “examine the relationships between the dominant sexuality's claim to normalcy and the resultant heterosexism and heteronormativity of the curricula, institutional organization, and school policies” (Mayo, 2014, p. 33). However, the participants' narratives about how good teacher allies do and should act suggest that, broadly, the field of K-12 education is not thinking about LGBT bias as an “Othering” problem, but rather as an “intolerance” or “bullying” problem—the former being a cultural problem and the later being behavioral. The former demands “the messy, pedagogically complicated enterprise of addressing the silent and invisible underpinnings of normalcy” (Macintosh, 2007, p. 35), and the latter only requires cleaner solutions of bullying interventions and tolerance training.

### **How I Perceive My (LGBTQ) Students**

As participants described their professional identities and their perspectives on effective teacher support for LGBTQ students, they also attempted to describe and characterize the category of students they were trying to reach. Overall, teachers' talk around how they “see”

LGBTQ students or interpret how they fit into (or not) their respective schools' student population involved complex negotiations of the categories of "normal" and "different." Some participants slipped back and forth between categorizing LGBTQ students as "normal" or "different," contradicting themselves and struggling to find language to accurately express how LGBTQ identities should be recognized in the context of a diverse student population. When participants did slip toward talking about how LGBTQ students might experience school differently than heterosexual peers, they quickly reverted back to the position that sexual and gender identity "did not matter" (Lewis, 2001, p. 783) in how they interacted with LGBTQ youth. Significantly, negotiating these categories did not involve explicit discussions of diversity within the category of "LGBTQ," and participants generally relied on a definition of "not heterosexual." As such, the teachers interpreted LGBTQ students' school experiences in terms of having different kinds of personal relationships or different romantic attractions than their heterosexual peers. Gender identity and expression were not mentioned in any significant way, neither to acknowledge the presence of transgender students nor to discuss how non-normative gender expression often attracts the labels *gay* or *lesbian* (or *dyke*, *fag*, or *tranny*) regardless of actual gender or sexual identity. Participants' descriptions of how they "see" LGBTQ students and their navigations of "sameness" versus "difference" lend insight to how LGBTQ students are perceived by teachers who are invested in giving them the best educational experience possible.

### **"Seeing" LGBTQ students**

Participants often dismissed the possibility that LGBTQ students should be "seen" differently than their peers, and their assertions that LGBTQ students are "normal" were used as evidence that they are good teachers and allies because "seeing" LGBTQ students as different would indicate discomfort or lack of acceptance toward gay youth. When describing the student

population at her school, Susan provided a list of the kinds of diversity she has observed among her students—including race, class, religion, (dis)ability, and students who moved to the community from different states and countries. At the end of her list she said, “I know you’re specifically interested in LGQBT (sic)” and explained why she had not included those identities earlier in her discussion of diversity:

I do see those students, but to be honest, sometimes I think it’s better that I don’t see them. You know, like, it’s not, “I know that you’re going through this in your life” or “I know that you’re identifying to be gay or a lesbian or whatever.” But to me that, to me, that, it speaks more that I don’t necessarily see that. You know? It’s not really an important aspect to the class. It doesn’t make you somebody who stands out and, you know, I need to know you, I need to be friends with you, I need to understand your perspective because it must be different from mine. You know. I don’t really see that a whole lot, which I’m kind of glad of. (Interview 1, 11/20/11)

In this discussion of her students’ LGBTQ identities, Susan interpreted gender identity or sexual orientation to be insignificant to her work of engaging her students in academic content and classroom activities. Susan minimized the importance of “seeing” these students in her classes or learning about their perspectives because knowing a student’s sexual orientation would not change how she teaches a student. LGBTQ identity was something she may not know about individual students and was not sure she needed to know because sexual orientation and gender identity were assumed to be private and “not really an important aspect to the class.” Thus, not seeing or not taking notice of students’ LGBTQ identities served as evidence of her success as an open, accepting educator. She argued that not “seeing” the sexual orientation of her gay and lesbian students means that this group of students does not draw more or different

attention than any other student. Not seeing LGBTQ students and not feeling that she needs to ask them to explain their experiences “speaks more” because it means these students have been normalized for her. In other words, a teacher who has not completely embraced the “normalcy” of LGBTQ students would focus their attention on these students or be curious about how their experiences are different from the norm because of their gender or sexuality, but for Susan LGBTQ students just blend in to the student population of her school.

Susan’s perspective on whether or not it is best to “see” LGBTQ students indicates both awareness of heteronormative Othering of LGBTQ youth and dismissal or avoidance of how gender and sexuality are potentially relevant to students’ classroom experiences. On one hand, Susan’s perspective of LGBTQ students and difference resists patterns of hypervisibility of LGBTQ identities. That is, she was aware of the possibility that LGBTQ students could be “seen” in her school because they stood out as different in a way that reinforced the stigmatization of LGBTQ identities and marked them as weird, deviant, or disruptive. This perspective reflects research findings indicating students whose gender expressions transgress strict heteronormative social norms and are visibly “different” from traditionally gendered peers often draw ridicule and aggression from peers (Horn, 2007). Susan’s resistance to this injurious version of “seeing” indicates a desire to make students feel welcome and free from these sorts of identity policing when they are in her presence. On the other, her rejection of the possibility that students’ sexual and gender identities could be relevant to academic work in her classroom sidesteps the messy work of examining how LGBTQ students might experience LGBTQ stigma in her classroom and disregards the perspectives of the students who she hopes to be supporting.

In many contexts, LGBTQ students cannot escape being labeled “different” or feeling different in relation to mainstream school culture because heteronormative structures, values, and



beliefs are pervasive in schools. Cultural elements such as high-profile boys' athletic teams, their accompanying rituals such as cheerleading and Homecoming, and conservative community values have been shown to intensify traditional gender norms and make school all the more hostile for LGBTQ youth (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). Some participants were aware of and talked about their schools' investment in such values and rituals but did not draw connections between these practices, the normalization of heterosexuality, and the Othering of LGBTQ students. The primary example of this was Paula, who had sharp critiques of the hyper masculine culture of her school, but also expressed disbelief about LGBTQ students feeling "different" or being perceived as "different." When she was asked about the core values in her school, she bluntly responded: "Football and cheerleading...it is a very masculine sports-dominated mentality" (Interview 1, 11/16/12). She reported that male athletes traveled around the school in "packs" and that there was a clear hierarchy of male athletes with football players at the top. Later in the same interview she spoke about the tension between her own perspective that LGBTQ students are "the same" and the possibility that this group of students will feel or be treated differently.

I don't understand why anybody would treat these kids differently. I mean, it just, it boggles my mind.

Like, I know that there's a problem. I know that those kids are more likely to, you know, hurt themselves and have dangerous thoughts, but I don't know, I see them like everybody else, so I guess I don't totally understand. So, that's where I'm kind of at right now. I know they feel different but I think they're the same. (Interview 1, 11/16/11)

Despite “knowing” anti-bullying and safe schools messages about LGBTQ students’ risk for self-harm or other “dangerous” behaviors, she could not imagine what LGBTQ students might be experiencing to produce such outcomes because she depended on how “I see them” to draw conclusions about their positions in the school. In Paula’s navigation of the categories of “same” and “different,” she stated that LGBTQ students are “the same” and “like everybody else,” which begs the question: The same as whom? The opposing social position against which she defined LGBTQ students implies a construction of “normal” students who do not experience scrutiny or ridicule at school. In heteronormative environments, “normal” demands heterosexuality and gender normativity, and likely includes successful participation in the heterosexual dating scene. Her own social position is heterosexual and normatively gendered, so “the same” is aligned with her own identity as much as it is with the “normal” students in the school. On the other hand, she correlated “difference” with the narratives she has heard about LGBTQ students being “at risk.” Rejecting the “different” label on behalf of her LGBTQ students is, therefore, a protective, caring act and an effort to encompass LGBTQ students into broader understandings of universal adolescent experience. However, it oversimplifies the experience of being students whose identities do not match the heteronormative values and social norms of their school. Further, defining difference as simply negative fails to leave room for experiences of difference that might be transformative or pleasurable as students push back against the normalization of heterosexuality and gender normativity.

Paula’s claim of ignorance or lack of understanding is an example of how social privilege obscures one’s perspective of the full range of experiences and circulations of power that occur in a particular context. Yancy (2008) argues that privileged “bodies move in and out of...spaces with ease, paying no particular attention to their numbers or looking for bodies that resemble

their own” (p. 40). Heterosexual, gender normative teachers and students have very little reason to seek validation for their presence in public school contexts. Paula is a young (27), petite, thin, traditionally attractive woman. She got married approximately two months before the research began, and there was evidence of her marriage in her classroom: “There is a picture of her with her husband and a wedding card with a picture of a husband and wife grabbing each other’s butts on her desk” (Observation, 12/16/11). Paula’s gender normative, heterosexual social position has allowed her to maneuver school spaces without awareness that heterosexual privilege constantly circulates throughout the school or of the possibility that this systemic privilege produces a school culture that does not value or welcome some students because of gender or sexuality difference. Her description of her interactions with LGBTQ students reflects this privileged perspective because is focused on her claim that LGBTQ students are “not different”:

But I just feel like I’ve only had positive experiences with the kids in that way [relationships with gay students] and, I don’t know, they’re, they’re, I love those kids, I really do. Their personalities, the way that they’ve been able to... I don’t know, be themselves? It’s so great to see. I mean, even from when I was in high school I can maybe think of like one kid who I knew was gay in high school. But then to have all these kids now just proud of it, it... it’s nice. And so I hope that they know, I think they know, that, I, hey, I think they’re great people. You know, they’re not different.

(Interview 1, 11/16/11)

Paula introduced coded language (Lewis, 2001) to integrate the differences she observed between gay and straight students into the “normal” range of differences she would observe in any group of students. She said their “personalities” stand out to her, and she compared students’ ability to “be themselves” and the number of students who are “proud” to be gay to her own high

school experiences—where she can only vaguely remember one gay peer. Each phrase is a mechanism for acknowledging how gay students’ expressions of identity transgress typical male or female gender expressions without explicitly naming how these students’ gender performances are different from heterosexual norms. Further, by focusing on gay students “being themselves” and being “proud,” she defined their difference in terms of individual personalities, which does not engage with the ways that heteronormative gender norms put gay students in a position where “being themselves” is an accomplishment rather than a taken-for-granted school experience. Her actions in the interest of LGBTQ students reflect her perspective of “I think they’re the same,” so she talks to them like other students and is friendly to them in the same way—an act that could actually exacerbate their feelings of marginalization if they perceive that their non-normative experiences of school are not being recognized.

**“Do you just pretend like he’s like everybody else?”**

The participants in this study were motivated to do the right thing for their LGBTQ students, and they did not want to do anything that would prohibit their success or make their school experiences any more difficult than they were already assumed to be. One of the most complicated and directly-stated navigations of these categories came from Molly, a teacher in a predominantly white and middle class suburban high school. During the final interview, she was asked to reflect on her role as a teacher who has identified herself as supportive of LGBTQ students, and her response exposed tensions and contradictions teachers experience around student identities that are outside the “norm” in their school contexts:

I think, I mean, every kid no matter what needs to feel like they belong. They need to feel like they’re accepted. And that they’re not being singled out for anything. Any particular thing. Um, on the other hand...I, I, you know, you...you worry about...I don’t know how

to put this. Like, overly *not* noticing. [laughs] You know what I mean? Like...Like, if someone, if a kid really is struggling but you're, you're trying, like, okay, I'm gonna use this example, 'cause I've had more, it's more overt, more obvious....Um, so, so you have a Black kid in the room. Especially in this school, there's not very many...So what do you do? Do you, um, do you just pretend like he's like everybody else, or do you embrace the Blackness? Right? That's a struggle. I don't know, what do you do? Does the kid want to just pretend like he's not Black? Does it, are, or, or do you, what do you do? Like, and that, you know, and I think the same thing is, is true with this sort of student. Like, you don't want to say, you don't want to use them as an example, but you also don't want to pretend that they're not there. So I think the best, I, I often will just sort of wait to see how the student responds and maybe, and, and try to give out the message, which I do with all kids, that I'm here if you want to talk about things. If you need, um, advice, you need support, something I'm not doing, to let me know. (Interview 3, 6/21/12)

Molly's questions rested on the assumption that there is a clear division between "different" students and "everybody else." LGBTQ and Black students are definitively "different," which makes "everybody else" who make up the mainstream student population heterosexual, gender conforming, and white. She imagined social belonging and acceptance to be the goals of students who are different, so her questions all focused on the teacher's role in facilitating belonging and acceptance in the classroom. More specifically, she worried that she could inadvertently prohibit social integration if she made the wrong decision and "single[d] out" students for the identity markers that make them "different" from the majority student population. Her example of the choice between pretending like a Black student is "like everybody else" or "embrac[ing] the

Blackness” indicates an understanding of diversity where it is possible for minority students to ignore a piece of their identity or where parts of their identities are irrelevant to the classroom. While this put the burden on the minority student to manage their identities to conform to classroom social norms, she also introduced the possibility that *she* could decide to make their “difference” relevant to the classroom, or she could ignore it. In either scenario, she would make the decision about “who” the student is in the classroom—a Black student, a gay student, or a “normal” student. She “knows” that tokenizing a minority voice is bad teaching practice, but she cannot imagine a pedagogical alternative for recognizing students’ social positions without “us[ing] them as an example” or making them feel “singled out.” The alternative that carried the least risk was to treat the “different” students the same as everybody else and wait for signals that they need a specific type support, despite feeling uncertain that this “overly not noticing” is good teaching practice.

Molly’s discomfort was apparent throughout this narrative, and this discomfort shaped her perspective on the most effective teaching practice for LGBTQ and other marginalized student groups. She expressed anxiety about making the wrong choices, asked the question “What do you do?” in reference to how teachers should acknowledge LGBTQ identities, and struggled to find accurate language to explain her perspectives. Further, her use of the language “this sort of student” to refer to LGBTQ students further signifies avoidance or discomfort around explicitly addressing gender and sexual diversity. Given these signs of anxiety, it is no wonder that her response to a question about her role as a teacher who supports LGBTQ youth was filled with questions about the “right” way to do this work. Ultimately, she chose to wait for students to give her signs about if and when they want their marginalized identities to be

explicitly part of class, which allowed her to stay away from gender, sexuality, and the tension between different and mainstream identity categories.

Teachers' perceptions of good teaching practice for LGBTQ youth were shaped by their assumptions about how marginalized students navigate feeling or being "different." For Molly, this meant avoiding any action where she might single a student out due to her or his marginalized identity category because she believed that students would prefer to "fit in" or blend into the mainstream student culture. Laura was another teacher who believed that students would prefer to feel the same as their peers, and she based this conclusion on her own experiences as a research chemist in a male-dominated workplace and, later, as a manager of mostly male colleagues. Laura's experiences of being treated like she was "different" were demeaning and disrespectful. Her strategies for teaching diverse student groups reflected her hope that her students would never have a similar experience. When asked to describe her role as a teacher who supports LGBTQ students, Laura responded:

To me, I don't really care what they are. They are still people, you know? And I'm sure I've got kids like that [LGBTQ-identified] but they're still people....And so I'm going to treat them the way I would treat any other person, you know? And I think maybe that goes back to my working as...a female scientist in an era where female scientists were very rare and everyone looked at me, you're female, you're a girl, you're a chemist, there's like all these guys and you are a girl doing this, and I got treated differently. And I wasn't any different. So maybe my just, we're all people. We're all in this together, we're going to make this work regardless of whether you're male, female, lesbian, gay, bisexual, whatever or purple, pink, you know, a leprechaun, I don't care. We all have to learn chemistry. (Interview 3, 6/14/12)

Laura's lack of concern about "what" her students are is an example of the logic of "difference blindness" (Tarca, 2005). She listed LGBTQ identities as possibilities for student differences, but she also included "purple, pink...a leprechaun" which both trivializes the relevance of gender or sexuality and illustrates the degree to which she "[doesn't] care" about "what" students are because those differences do not affect their learning or her responsibility to support their academic success. She believed that approaching her students "as people" and focusing on their academic needs were the best strategies to meet her responsibility as a chemistry teacher.

While it is true that Laura's experiences of stigma and marginalization likely make her an empathetic teacher, it also means that she was relying on her own experiences to create her classroom culture rather than placing student perspectives and experiences at the center of her decision-making. Additionally, her commitment to "they are all still people" is a mechanism for talking about supporting diverse students without naming differences. She is implying a belief that the classroom is neutral ground where any student has the same opportunity for engagement and belonging, regardless of social position. Tarca (2005) argues that this kind of "difference blindness" ultimately represents "a lack of vision and nonrecognition of potentially useful information...[which] disable[s] a school's [or teacher's] power to reach all students" (p. 109). Laura argued that all students would have equal educational opportunity as long as she committed herself to every single student's chemistry learning. However, Laura's total focus on the sameness of her students assumed universal adolescent and high school experiences, and it neglected to account for how her students' various social positions were relevant to how they experienced school and engaged with the process of learning chemistry.

A consistent narrative from the interview data was that being "different" was a burden for LGBTQ students, so effective teachers should focus on students' sameness and do their best not



to let differences affect classroom operations. This finding is consistent McIntyre's (2009) research, which also produced the finding that teachers struggled with the contradiction between the assimilationist "all kids are the same" narrative and LGBTQ students being "paradoxically positioned as also different" (p. 303). Rachel contradicted this narrative. She claimed that student differences were integral to her academic interactions with students but do not limit or change her investment in their success, and their non-academic conversations are where she comes to know their social positions, perspectives, and experiences. She aimed to simultaneously recognize and value difference *and* not allow difference to become a means of exclusion or a barrier to learning.

Because...kids that identify as being gay just know that—I, I just really, I think the thing is I just don't see it as an issue where people see it as an issue. It's just not an issue to me. I don't think about it. I mean, I think about it because you have to think about it and you have to recognize differences like, you can't ignore them. I don't think about it in terms of—I actually don't think there's anything wrong with it...And I am religious and I am Catholic and like whatever, but I just don't judge. Like I, I just don't have an issue. And I really don't see anything wrong with it. (Interview 1, 4/3/12)

Rachel positioned herself as a source of respite from a school community that excludes or morally regulates LGBTQ identities, and she described herself in opposition to people who see gay identity as "an issue"—as abnormal, deviant, or immoral. She perceived other people to be judgmental of LGBTQ students and, regardless of her membership in a religious institution that does not affirm LGBTQ identities, she is not a person who "see[s] anything wrong" with identifying as LGBTQ.

The significant difference between this teacher and other participants was that she never mentioned the possibility of minimizing the importance of differences or focusing on sameness. Instead, she said matter-of-factly, “you have to recognize differences...you can’t ignore them.” So, while other participants overlooked issues of gender, sexuality, and other intersecting identities in their interactions with students, Rachel understood them as part of her work of knowing students and learning about their lives. She restated this position when describing the role she takes in supporting LGBTQ youth:

My clear role is to educate them. I don’t differentiate when I educate. You know, I...no, I *do* differentiate when I educate...but like I don’t differentiate between, like, who I’m educating and like, you know, I treat everybody the same when I’m up in front of a class or when they’re working on something. But when it comes to all of the other things that are very important in their lives, the social issues, the identity issues, I just leave it open there where I’m, I’m someone that has no problem asking or saying, like, “What did you do this weekend?” “Oh, did you have fun?” “Who are you taking to prom?” (Interview 2, 6/19/12)

Like other participants, Rachel framed her support for LGBTQ students through her professional responsibility to provide equal educational opportunities for every student. However, she was unique to this pool of participants because she was the only teacher who extended this framework to emphasize that it is also important to “differentiate” when addressing “social issues, the identity issues.” Rachel tripped on the word “differentiate” because it is an educational buzzword referencing the widely accepted practice of adjusting instruction to meet the various academic needs in a classroom at any given moment. She clarified to say she does *not* differentiate when it comes to deciding which students to support academically—she is

committed to educating all—but she *does* differentiate her pedagogy and “leave[s] it open” when addressing students’ “social issues...[and] identity issues.” She “has no problem” asking students questions about their lives outside the academic classroom, and these conversations create possibilities for making connections where students’ various social positions are recognized and affirmed. In another interview she offered examples of these conversations—asking students open-ended questions such as “Are you struggling with something?” if she suspects the student might be struggling with sexual orientation or gender identity, talking to masculine-identified lesbian students about wearing tuxes to prom instead of dresses, and helping gay couples make plans for prom. These are examples of conversations that affirm LGBTQ identity by both recognizing her LGBTQ students experiences within the context of “normal” high school student experiences *and* speaking directly about student differences that are marginalized in heteronormative school culture.

### **Summary**

Throughout participants’ teacher and ally identity narratives, they avoided direct engagement with issues of sexual or gender diversity. Instead, the teachers described themselves as supportive of LGBTQ students through the broader diversity frameworks that call on teachers to be open and accepting towards “all students,” to allow students to “be themselves,” to create environments where all students feel safe and respected, and to prevent LGBTQ students from experiencing judgment or discrimination. Further, the teachers in this study expressed the belief that LGBTQ students are no more “different” than any of their peers. “Seeing” or recognizing LGBTQ students within fiercely heteronormative institutions is tricky because of “the problem of how to welcome and include people defined as culturally or socially ‘different’ in the larger community, without, at the same time, stigmatizing them as deviant or inferior on that basis”

(Langmann, 2010, p. 227). As participants navigated the categories of “same” and “different,” they used language to indicate that LGBTQ students are, in fact, different from “normal” constructions of adolescent students, but their repeated claims that LGBTQ students are *not* different indicates discomfort with the label itself, as it is accompanied by connotations of social exclusion, bullying, or other social experiences that would make school difficult for LGBTQ students. In short, “teachers may well believe that in order to protect children who are different, it is better not to point out and talk about the difference but assert sameness” (McIntyre, 2009, p. 304).

Despite distancing themselves from direct engagement with gender and sexual diversity, participants were conscious of the reality that LGBTQ students often have more difficulty navigating school environments than their heterosexual peers. All participants wanted to avoid doing anything to make students’ lives harder. Their professional identity narratives indicate that their perspectives on the “right” way to support LGBTQ youth are being shaped by educational and political discourses that frame the problem of LGBTQ youth marginalization in terms of individual injury, rather than systemic oppression and inequality. This raises questions about the possibilities for sustainable change if educators are “unaware of the way heteronormative discourses shape their take-for-granted assumptions about student behavior and feelings” (Petrovic & Rosiek, 2007, p. 211). Attention to where these assumptions are being made tell us a great deal about how heterosexuality continues to be privileged in allies’ classrooms, and the brief moments when they are challenged or disrupted provide glimpses of the possibilities for more equitable pedagogy.

## Chapter 5: ALLY PEDAGOGY

All nine participants agreed that a critical part of creating classroom culture where all can learn—particularly for successfully educating students who are “different” in some way—is establishing standards for acceptance, safety, and respect in their classrooms. Throughout the study, most participants repeatedly returned to the idea that their classrooms were “safe” or “comfortable” for LGBTQ students because of their day-to-day approaches to curriculum and classroom management, *not* necessarily because of specific decisions they made to address the needs of LGBTQ students or to explicitly address gender and sexual diversity in their curriculum. Teachers’ strategies for creating these safe and comfortable learning environments fell into two broad categories of classroom practice: (1) *developing classroom community* and (2) *expanding students’ worldviews*. Both were presented as frameworks for pursuing the goal of making all students “comfortable” in school and teaching youth to be “accepting” of all others, regardless of the type of difference. Further, participants’ approaches to pursuing these goals were connected to their academic content. In other words, they pursued the opportunities their curriculum gives them to develop relationships, build trust, build community, teach acceptance, and disrupt bias and stereotypes.

### Defining Pedagogy

Each participant presented examples of her pedagogy that she understood to reflect her ally identity claims and address possible problems that LGBTQ students experience in their schooling. *Pedagogy* is a term that is used to encompass the broad range of work that makes up the practice of educating others. *Pedagogy* can refer to the practices of an individual, or it can refer to educational frameworks that aim to translate particular theoretical foundations to practice such critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, social justice pedagogy, and queer pedagogy.

Youdell (2011), who argues for a brand of critical pedagogy that “unsettle[s] the normative knowledges, meanings, practices and subjectivities that ordinarily circulate unquestioned in the classroom” (p. 88-9), describes pedagogy as follows:

Pedagogy is central to what educators do. It is the act and the art of engaging learners in learning, opening up new possibilities and ideas, and, perhaps, changing the learner and the teacher through this process. It is influenced by how educators think about and engage with educational systems, structures, spaces and processes. It involves how they think about what it means to learn and to teach, and how they think about and engage with students. (p. 85)

This definition of pedagogy encompasses the breadth of work teachers must do in order to advance their students’ thinking and facilitate academic success. “Engaging learners in learning” involves instructional methods, strategies for developing teacher/student relationships, and facilitation of collaborative student work. Each teacher’s pedagogy is shaped by her beliefs about optimal conditions for learning and possibilities for student success, as well as beliefs about what it takes to be a successful educator of diverse groups of students. As such, *pedagogy* is an important focus of inquiry when pursuing deeper understanding of the work educators do to meet the needs of marginalized students.

### **Comfortable Classrooms**

Participants shared an overall concern for the quality of their classroom environments, and their descriptions of their classroom cultures often included similar vocabulary to their teacher and ally identity narratives. Classroom operations were framed as extensions or reflections of themselves, so their perceptions of how students experienced their classes typically aligned with how they *intended* for students to experience their classes. Overall, the teachers in

this study responded to questions about optimal classroom spaces for LGBTQ students by describing approaches to creating environments where all students are able to be successful, and such classrooms were believed to be achieved through operationalizing the concept of *comfort*. Participants presumed that a comfortable environment would maximize the likelihood that students will experience school without distress, trauma, or fear. In these descriptions of classroom community, each teacher placed importance on her role as the leader of the classroom—communicating expectations for engagement and regulating the boundaries of appropriate behavior.

### **Defining *Comfortable***

The prevalence of the word *comfortable* across the data set creates an opportunity for close, critical analysis of how this concept of comfort is being defined by teachers, how they evaluate the level of comfort their students experience in their classrooms, their classroom actions aimed at making students feel comfortable, and how “comfort” relates to the work of educating marginalized students. Teachers used *comfortable* as an umbrella terms for visions they have of classrooms where students want to spend their time, participate, learn, have fun, feel respected, and feel safe. LGBTQ students were understood to be more likely to feel uncomfortable than their peers because they are “different” in ways that peers may judge or target with harassment. They believed that students need to feel comfortable in order to learn, so it is their responsibility to pay attention to the quality of the classroom culture and take action if they observed signs of discomfort from any student. Much like teachers’ emphasis on the importance of accepting “all students,” they believed it was necessary and possible to create classroom cultures where any student could join the group at any time and be able to learn

because all individuals would be accepted and differences—like gender or sexual orientation difference—would not “matter.”

**Comfort and participation.** Teachers envisioned optimal learning to include active, vocal participation in classroom activities. It was assumed that if students were not comfortable, they would be quiet or hesitant to engage in activities where they were expected to share their knowledge of academic content. Therefore, students’ vocal participation was used as evidence of whether or not they had successfully facilitated a classroom where students want to be and want to learn. Susan is a French teacher, and because speaking French is an important part of the language acquisition process, she used students’ vocal participation to evaluate the comfort level in her classes:

Mel: What are some things that you hope that I'm seeing in the community?

Susan: The kids are not afraid to speak up. Um, if they're nervous, we [language teachers] can never get them to speak in the foreign language. If they're nervous, we can't get them to speak period.... So I hope that that is visible, and I hope that the kids' general demeanor, I'd like them to feel comfortable and happy when they walk in the room, you know, not worried about who's sitting around them or what person's going to say across the room. So I really just want them to feel comfortable. (Interview 1, 11/20/11)

Susan needs students to feel relaxed enough to speak if she is going to teach them effectively, and this requires students to feel comfortable taking the risk of making a grammatical error or pronouncing a word incorrectly. Susan recognized the possibility that students could feel “nervous” or “afraid” and that their academic engagement could be affected by apprehension about the peers “sitting around them” or “across the room.” This implies that she, as the teacher,



needs to be aware of social dynamics that could be prohibiting student speech and take action if some sort of student conflict does impact academic engagement.

Paula is a social studies teacher, and she used the word *comfortable* to describe a classroom environment where students feel they can engage in “sharing their ideas” or “questioning some ideas.”

I feel like kids are, um, they’re open to sharing their ideas, um, as far as, like, comfortableness. You know, I think we all just laugh if somebody gets something wrong, but not in a mean way....So it’s very comfortable in that they share and they um, they feel okay questioning some ideas. (Interview 1, 11/16/11)

Her description of comfort implies the expectation that successful social studies curriculum and instruction engages youth in civil discourse about social and historical issues, and such conversations are part of students’ development into engaged citizens (Schmidt, 2010). She acknowledged the possibility that laughter or teasing could occur during class discussions, but she phrased it as the group laughing together, not students targeting one another. Many students in Paula’s classes eagerly and frequently volunteered answers during every observed class period, but a few in each class never volunteered. Paula attempted to engage these students by asking them specific questions and not allowing other students to jump in and volunteer the answer. For example, during an eleventh grade United States history lesson, Paula walked over to a student who rarely spoke in class and asked her:

“What’s an amendment?” and “What does it change?” She couldn’t answer the question and when Paula told her the answer—the Constitution—she said, “I knew that!” Paula replied: “I know you knew that.” [OC: *As if to reassure her.*] [The student] slapped the table. [OC: *As if expressing frustration.*] (field notes, 12/16/11)

Here, Paula attempted to engage a student who typically did not participate in class discussions by asking her questions that she believed the student would know. Given the student's grade level, the time in the school year (end of first semester), and the content of the lesson—the origins and content of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments—it was reasonable to assume that *amendment* had been a regular part of this class' vocabulary and should be an easy question for any student to answer. Although this student did not remember the right answer in the moment, Paula reassured her that she believed she really knew the answer. This is an example of Paula providing low risk opportunities for students to feel comfortable verbally participating in class discussions and include her in the class discussion, and it is indicative of pedagogy that places value on providing as many students as possible with access to participation in classroom conversation.

**Comfort and making mistakes.** Another use of the word “comfort” in teacher interviews was in the context of students' willingness to ask questions and admit when the academic content was hard for them. Many of Kelly's students had a history of struggling in science classes, and her approach to creating an optimal learning environment reflected her concern for those students' needs:

I would say, the overall atmosphere of my classroom, I try to make it so that it is very inviting. I want everybody regardless of your, like, you know, um, academic level et cetera to feel very comfortable. So I want it to be okay to be wrong. Um, so I do try to be relatively laid-back just because I want the atmosphere to be comfortable. (Interview 1, 11/14/11)

Kelly's list of the good qualities of her classroom atmosphere are similar to Paula and Susan's in that they all want students to have opportunities to verbally participate in the class, even if that

means they risk sharing a wrong answer or making a mistake on an assignment. Kelly intended to portray herself in a way that kids would perceive her as being accepting of their mistakes and of all students' learning processes, whether they learn new material easily or if they struggle and require additional teacher support. Throughout Kelly's classroom observations, students frequently asked questions or told her when they did not understand concepts or instructions. Sometimes students asked questions in the middle of a lecture ("Why does alcohol cause kidney failure?" during a lecture about the excretory system) or shouted out requests for help ("Ms. R., I don't get this!" during a lab activity), and she always responded promptly and patiently. In addition, most of Kelly's lesson plans involved at least a few minutes when she walked around the room, watching students working and pausing to answer their questions. Regardless of her lesson plan structure, students asked her questions or asked her to check their work during each observation, which indicated she had been successful establishing questions and mistakes as "normal" learning experiences in her classroom.

Laura was another teacher who wanted questions, risk-taking, and making mistakes to be routine stages in her students' learning processes. Additionally, she wanted students to ask each other questions, collaborate, and teach each other about difficult concepts rather than only rely on her to help them when they were struggling. In this interpretation of "comfort" she hoped her students would experience the classroom as a place where they can trust and rely on their classmates and create personal connections with their peers:

And, um, I also said you know, sometimes, "Turn to the person next to you" and they ask each other questions. "See if you can answer things with each other and not just me."

And that kind of lets...that breaks the ice between them to know that they can talk to

people, and I'm like, "I don't hear any talking. Talk!"...So they get used to each other, they're comfortable with each other.

[O]nce we get going, we kind of are a group and we're kind of all there for each other and we help each other. I've had kids, they'll help the people that they don't even really normally sit with or talk with. They'll help each other out. So, in my classroom, I feel that it's, again, a nice, safe, little happy environment that we can work in. (Interview 3, 6/14/12)

Throughout the study, Laura said that one of her greatest challenges in her chemistry classes was getting past students' fear of science, so she had to find ways to put students at ease and increase student engagement in classroom activities. The metaphor of "breaking the ice" reflects an understanding of "comfortable" that includes dismantling barriers between individual students so that all will engage in the learning community, and it is also "breaking" their assumptions that they cannot learn science. Laura's strategy for "breaking the ice" was to remind them to work together and learn from each other, and she observed that her students came together as her encouragement to communicate and collaborate started to take hold. Her perception was that students felt "happy" in such an environment and that she had created conditions where it was possible for any students to overcome their doubts about learning science.

**Being comfortable and feeling valued.** The vocabulary of comfort was also used to describe the importance of making students feel like they are valuable members of the community. One of Karen's priorities was for her students to know that she values their presence and their contributions:

Uh, generally kids want to be here. They like it. They want to be here. It's fun, and it, for most kids it is a comfortable environment where they feel accepted and valued. I think.

That's what I want. I do what I can to make it that way for them. (Interview 1, 11/9/11)

When asked to provide examples of how she makes students feel accepted and valued, she described specific strategies that represent her approach to creating such an environment:

I say things like, "It's okay, don't worry it's okay to make a mistake. Everybody makes mistakes. I make mistakes. So, you know we're all learning here, and you know, if you make a mistake, don't worry about it. It's not a big deal." And...I'll say, you know, "Stop talking so-and-so because I want to hear what such-and-such has to say. And everybody should be listening to so-and-so because she may be saying something really interesting, so I want nobody to talk. She has the floor now, not you."....I make sure everybody gets a chance to say something, um, and I, you know, use lots of positive strokes. I use encouragement, and enthusiasm to make them feel good about answering and volunteering. Um, you know, lots of gestures and facial gestures and, um, and....I ask them what they, what their interests are. I try to engage them in conversations about themselves. So, who wouldn't want to be in class where, you know, you get to talk about you? (Interview 1, 11/9/11)

Like other teachers who talked about the importance of a comfortable classroom, Karen connected feelings of comfort with students' verbal participation in the classroom. She believed feeling comfortable with the risk of making a mistake was an important part of the learning process, and she reinforced this message by encouraging and praising them and reminding them that all people—including the teacher—experience mistakes. Throughout her observations, she responded to incorrect answers with statements like, "I'm sorry to say that won't work. We're

going to learn why in about five minutes” (field notes 1/18/12), or “It’s okay. You’re still learning. It’s not a test” (field notes, 1/20/12). Such statements communicated that mistakes and uncertainty were expected and welcome elements of the learning process, and she would continue to value them as students and as people regardless of how they answered a question or how fast they learned the material. Additionally, she planned her lessons to give students opportunities to engage with the curriculum by applying new vocabulary and language skills to stories about their own lives, interests, and opinions. This instructional method was a way to communicate to students that she “accepts and values” their experiences. She reinforced this message by stopping students who interrupt their peers and talking to students about the value of listening to all students’ ideas, and she made an effort to give all students opportunities to speak. Further, her strategy of giving them practice speaking a new language by asking them about their opinions and experiences was another method for expressing to students that she was interested in them as individuals.

**Comfortable for whom?** The teachers’ use of “comfortable” as their benchmark for an ideal class environment illustrates how they interpret both students’ material experiences of their classes and the types of work teachers should do to create learning environments where all feel safe and able to learn. Participants formed their actions in response to the possibility that students may feel *discomfort* in relation to conflict with classmates, fear of vocally participating in class, the risk of being perceived as a student who is not smart, or the risk of being disrespected. Their indicators for determining students’ feelings of comfort were observing students’ willingness to “shar[e] ideas,” “speak up,” frequency of student questions, and whether or not students seem willing to risk a wrong answer. As such, their understanding of discomfort and their responsibilities as teachers to *create* comfort are focused on increasing these behaviors,

reflecting an obligation to engage all students in academic work and the possibility that social conflict—understood as a common adolescent experience—could prohibit academic success.

By connecting comfort to visible forms of academic engagement or the possibility that peer conflict could prohibit specific classroom behaviors, participants individualized student experiences of comfort and assumed that the classroom could be a neutral environment where hierarchies of difference do not matter. That is, the teachers understood comfort in terms of individual students' experiences of the social dynamics and academic expectations in the classroom. While it is true that individuals will experience and navigate social environments differently, all are also navigating systems of social norms that presume the presence of certain kinds of identities and fail to acknowledge the existence of others. As Ahmed (2004) argues, the dominant social norms of any given space must be acknowledged and interrogated in order to determine for whom it is possible to be comfortable and who experiences the discomfort of being positioned outside the norm. This is the power of heteronormativity: “comfort is very hard to notice when one experiences it” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 147) because “[h]eteronormativity functions as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape” (p. 148). Thus, those who occupy dominant social positions have difficulty imagining the full range of possibilities for *discomfort*, and this ultimately limits possibilities for identifying and addressing teaching practice or social dynamics that reinforce heteronormativity in the classroom.

Speaking specifically to the school experiences of LGBTQ youth, one of the primary effects of heteronormativity is that it makes heterosexual people feel comfortable in most public spaces. Even in the case of these teachers who have expressed awareness that LGBTQ students experience social stigma, it is difficult for heterosexual teachers to examine the “how” and

“why” of their own comfort. They do not presume all students to be heterosexual or believe heterosexual identities should be privileged over other sexual identities, but they also believe they can create classroom spaces where social and cultural hierarchies are irrelevant—where social positions related to race, class, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability do not matter because all students are presumed to have equal power or status. By disregarding students’ genders and sexualities in discussions of classroom climate, teachers miss how norms concerning these two issues are related to comfort—how heterosexuality is everywhere in the school and pressing on queer students, reminding them that they do not fit comfortably into the space.

### **Connections Between Community and Curriculum**

Each teacher in this study was committed to her academic content, maintaining high standards, and increasing her students’ knowledge and skills as much as possible. They were as concerned with each student’s individual academic development as they were with their class’ shared experiences of the academic content, and these two facets of their pedagogy were understood to be intertwined. Participants told stories of academic experiences as *shared* experiences to illustrate their visions for how methods for delivering curriculum can create—or at least support—positive connections between students who may not connect in any other context besides their experiences in a specific classroom. Such efforts reflect the construction of safe classrooms that presumes students feel safe in environments where they experience friendship, respect, and an exchange of ideas—as opposed to exclusion or discrimination. Much like the inclusion model of “safe space,” which “revolves around how to help LGBTQ people feel comfortable within existing frameworks” (Fox, 2007, p. 67), participating teachers tried to work with existing institutional structures such as their required curriculum to create classroom cultures that are inclusive for “all students.”



## Shared Experiences

Susan believed that shared academic experiences were key to creating a strong sense of community in her classes. She traveled back and forth between schools, which she said limited her opportunities to see students before and after school. However, she believed she was able to build strong relationships with her students without this extra student contact time because she designed her French classes to be “positive” academic experiences where she provided students with opportunities to immerse themselves in learning about French language and culture:

I think sometimes it’s the stuff that you do in class. Like, the classroom experiences that you’re able to, you know, it’s almost like an experience. I feel like that Level 3 [OC: third-year French] specifically there’s certain projects that we do at certain times of the year, and because we display them in the classroom, younger kids see them and then when they get to do it they’re kinda like, “Oh! Yeah! This project! Woo!” You know? So it’s like a milestone. (Interview 3, 6/21/12)

Susan taught multiple levels of French, and she tried to create “experiences” for her students that came as close as possible to actually participating in a French-speaking culture. She left student work on display in her classroom all year so younger students could look at the projects and look forward to completing their own in the future. Student excitement about “milestone” projects was observed when she introduced her annual *Feuilleton* (soap opera) project. Students exclaimed “Yes!” when she told them about the assignment, and one student told her friends, “J’adore feuilleton!” (field notes, 12/2/12). A second example of shared academic experiences was a storytelling method she used with all of her classes. Either Susan or a student proposed a story topic, and the class collectively told a story speaking only in French:

Susan asked for a volunteer to be the actor or actress. Bryan volunteered. He stood, took

off his sweatshirt, and walked to the front of the room. S: “Bryan is getting ready.” She asked students for ideas for their character’s name. Students shouted out Felipe, Donald, Raoul.” S: “Raoul got the biggest reaction!” The class said he should be 100 years old, have back pain, and trouble walking. As they listed off his characteristics, Bryan acted out the posture and walk of an ailing old man. *[This all happened in French, so I watched Ben and Susan’s body language to figure out the story and checked my notes with Susan after class.]* Susan started the story by saying Bryan was a famous painter who created a magnificent painting, and she gave Bryan a marker to draw a picture. He turned to the board and hesitated. Susan told him it could be abstract. While he drew, Susan made exclamations about the beauty of his work. Her tone of voice and body language were animated and energetic. A male student in the middle of the room said, “What does it (the painting) mean!?!” A female student critiqued the painting, and Susan gestured for her to join them at the front of the room and incorporated her critique into the story. (field notes, 5/10/12)

This was an activity that her classes completed periodically throughout the school year to practice new vocabulary, and Susan believed it facilitated development of community and helped students connect with their classmates because it required students to work together to complete a shared final product. She facilitated the storytelling by asking students questions or presenting problems that needed to be solved within the story, but it was primarily up to the students to get from beginning to end of their narrative. Susan followed the students’ lead as she facilitated the activity, as can be seen when she incorporated an art critic into the plot of the story about the artist. Susan wanted to release as much control as possible to the students to support their creativity and push them to work together.

I never plan a story before I do it. It's the kids. It's their story, because they make it way better than I did...If I have a story, they'd say something and I'd be like, "Oh forget my idea, this is way better." So I don't even bother making an idea now, which some teachers aren't comfortable with, just because it's like too fluid, you know, too questionable. What if nothing comes to you? And I do have days like that. Like, ah, where am I going to go with this?...And there's like certain things when there's a problem in the story, all the kids are supposed to say, "Oh no, quoi faire? Quoi faire? Which is, "Oh no, Oh no! What to do? What to do?" And so they all have to say it at the same time in a choral response, and I know they're paying attention. Or we do funny things. We're, like every time I say the word lamp, you have to click or something, stuff like that. So it's just trying to get them involved, that it does kind of develop a community. (Interview 2, 4/25/12)

Susan believes that her willingness to release control of the trajectory of the story—and her lesson plan—was important to the success of this teaching method. The widely accepted professional norm is that teachers are expected to control the pace and trajectory of each class and teach lessons with the end in mind: they are supposed to know how they want their students to be thinking at the end of every class period. Susan presented an example where her objective was clear—she wanted students to use their language skills to develop a story and speak French for a sustained period of time—but she was just as unsure about the plot of the story as her students were. This lesson structure troubles the taken-for-granted power relations between teachers and kids because the teacher releases some of her authority and expertise to the students. All must work together to solve the problem of getting their story from beginning to end, and the shared uncertainty puts all participants in a position where they must communicate to reach the goal of a complete story. By also including “funny things” like clicking or snapping when

specific words are used, she created a point of access for students who do not make verbal suggestions for the story and she is able to monitor all students' engagement and make decisions to ensure all students are part of the shared classroom experience.

### **Shared Experiences: Uncomfortable Topics**

Kelly also believed that shared academic experiences were significant to the quality of community in her classroom, and her exemplar of this phenomenon was her experiences teaching about human reproduction. As a biology teacher, Kelly was required to teach basic information about reproduction, and she believed that this specific academic content—and her approach to teaching it—had an impact on the quality of her classroom community. She distinguished herself from her colleagues because it was one of her favorite topics to teach, and she pushed beyond the state-mandated curriculum to include information about contraception and sexually transmitted disease prevention—including a “question day” when students had an opportunity to submit anonymous questions. Although she recognized that “it’s probably a touchy area for me to be, kind of, be going as a non-tenured teacher” she made the decision to teach this way because “I feel like it’s important.” Kelly believed that this portion of her curriculum—which occurred in the spring semester—was significant to the quality of her classroom community because it served as a turning point for her students’ relationships with each other and for her relationships with students:

Um, but by the end of that unit as a class, we are so much more open with each other and it really, it does, it changes the dynamic for the better, I think. And part of me wishes that I did it earlier on in the year but I also feel like if I did it would be too soon. Like, I feel like when I do it is exactly when we’re ready. We know each other enough, we have a good enough classroom environment where we’re ready to do it. And then unfortunately

it's just that there's not that much time left in the year. So, but it does, it changes, it does, it changes the class. And, and it's good. I mean, I had, this year, um, one of my students came in, it was like between periods, she came in dragging two of her other friends, and she goes, "Ask her, ask her." I'm like, "Ask me what?" *[Laughs]* And her friends had questions that they were debating back and forth, you know, wanted to know the answer....And, so they're bringing in their friends because they don't have people to go to talk to. You're not going to ask your parents, or most people aren't. And, so, I feel like if it has to be me that has to answer their sex questions then so be it. (Interview 3, 6/11/12)

Talking about sex in a public school classroom—even in the context of state-mandated biology curriculum—is risky work for teachers (Ashcraft, 2008; 2012). Because of the stigmatization of this topic in school settings, teachers are often uncomfortable or fearful about the possible conversations that could occur with students, so they rush through the scientific facts of reproduction and leave students very little opportunity to discuss the subject at all. Students also experience discomfort, which is only exacerbated when teachers are so obviously affected by the stigmatization of teaching about sex. In her research on sex education and sexuality curriculum as a vehicle for developing students' academic skills, Ashcraft (2012) argued that adults' ability to comfortably and candidly use language about sexuality with their students "turn[s] on its head the narrative that teens are too immature to discuss matters of sexuality with adults or each other" and "disrupt[s the] traditional silences in school settings" (p. 607). Kelly intended to communicate to students that "You're not going to shock me with whatever it is you're going to ask" (Interview 3, 6/11/12). In other words, she wanted students to perceive her as open and non-judgmental in response to their knowledge and questions about sex. Further, she introduced

the topic to her classes by both acknowledging potential discomfort and emphasizing the importance of being knowledgeable about sexual reproduction:

Kelly walked into the classroom as the bell rang. A boy asked her, “What about the stork?” K: “The stork? Oh, that brings the babies? We’ll get there.” She told them today is “the day you’ve been waiting for. We start sexual reproduction.” [*OC: The kids clearly knew this, or at least the kids asking about the stork did.*] “Here’s the deal. We have to be mature. It’s on the Regents so we have to learn it. That doesn’t mean that *penis* can’t be funny.” She also told them that this is the one thing from this class that they’ll need to know in their lives, so they need to learn it. (field notes, 4/24/12)

Kelly began her first reproduction lecture by setting a tone of frankness and humor. She played along with the student’s joke about the stork, acknowledged the possibility of laughter and humor during their upcoming classes, and said *penis* out loud—a word that some students may feel uncomfortable hearing in conversation with a teacher. She also modeled correct vocabulary while she helped students label images of reproductive system: “Scrotum is the science-y term for ball sack” and “Write ‘testes.’ Don’t write ‘balls’ on the Regents” (field notes, 4/24/12). By using correct vocabulary from the beginning, Kelly set the expectation that the vocabulary of sexual reproduction was expected and that they would not shy away from words that are often believed to be inappropriate in school contexts or uncomfortable in conversations between adults and youth. This tone of being straight forward and direct was consistent with her decision to provide students with an opportunity to submit anonymous questions about sex and sexually transmitted diseases because both communicate the message that her classroom is a space where adolescents can talk about sex, access accurate information, and do both without fear of shame or punitive consequences.

**Uncomfortable topics: LGBTQ exclusions.** Kelly presented her approach to discussing sex in the context of a biology class as an example of how she used her curriculum to “change the dynamic for the better” in her classes, but it was also an example of blatant heterosexism in high school curriculum. She successfully initiated conversations about sex and included information that other teachers would not provide to their students, but sex was discussed exclusively as a heterosexual, reproductive act; women were discussed using diminutive terms; and lessons structures were dependent on binary gender categories—i.e. male anatomy versus female anatomy and male hormones versus female hormones. This was true in the classroom observation, the study materials she distributed to her students, and in her interviews. Classes were observed on the first day of the unit, and lesson content included vocabulary and labeling diagrams of the male and female reproductive systems. The first half of the 80-minute class was devoted to male anatomy, and then she transitioned focus to female anatomy. Throughout class she relied on the categories of “male” and “female” as opposite and absolutely distinct from one another, referring frequently to the differences between “the girls” and “the guys” and telling students they would spend equal time discussing male and female anatomy because, “It’s gotta be even! Gotta be fair!” (field notes, 4/24/12). The only context when she troubled the absolute difference between men and women was when discussing testosterone and estrogen: “Kelly called testosterone the ‘male hormone’—used air quotes—‘but all women have it too in lower levels. And vice versa for estrogen’” (field notes, 4/24/12). Additionally, she deviated from her insistence on using “correct” vocabulary for sexual anatomy when she discussed the female reproductive system:

When she got to the “vagina” part of the diagram, she told the class that last year she had a student who didn’t like the word “vagina” and started calling it *VAH*-hee-na. [OC:

*Emphasis on the first syllable. Teacher and class laughed as she told this story.* J K: “I kind of like that better, too.” She used that pronunciation in place of “vagina” for the rest of the class. (field notes, 4/24/12)

Collectively, these details from this human reproduction lesson reproduce cultural assumptions about sex, gender, and sexuality that privilege gender normativity and heterosexual masculinity and marginalize the voices of both girls and LGBTQ youth. First, giving students permission to use a “funny” or “cute” word in place of *vagina* diminished the power of the young women in the classroom by implying that scientific accuracy was not as important for women as it was for men. Quite simply, students were required to take *penis* seriously, but *vagina* could be turned into a joke. Second, information about the difference between sex and gender identity were completely omitted from lesson content. *Male* and *female* were presented as stable binary categories and, because possibilities for non-cisgender identities were not mentioned, the class operated on the assumption that all human experience will align with one of the two categories that Kelly presented to them. In total, this lesson is a clear example of how the lines between “normal” and “different” gender and sexual identities are re-taught and reproduced in classrooms all the time. Students walked away from this class period with lessons about anatomy and lessons about narrow definitions of masculine and feminine. These are norms that serve as tools for acts of aggression that police the boundaries of “normal” in school settings.

There were significant contradictions in Kelly’s self-identification as a teacher ally and her methods for teaching about sex in her biology classes. Kelly experienced this part of her curriculum as an opportunity to teach students information that was relevant to their life experiences, and she pushed the boundaries of the assumed “appropriateness” of providing students with accurate information about sex by expanding the biology curriculum to cover a



broader range of information that will help them make decisions about their health and relationships. Her approach to the sex and reproduction curriculum encouraged concrete application, rather than insisting that the abstract biological facts remain disconnected from the lives of the adolescent students in the room. Further, she thought it was important for students to know that she did not judge their decisions, nor did she think negatively of them if they made mistakes or admitted their bad decisions. However, the content of the curriculum and the supplemental information she provided assumed that her students were heterosexual and gender conforming. It is possible that LGBTQ students read Kelly's willingness to have difficult conversations with students as a symbol of her openness to diverse student experiences and identities, but it is just as possible that they experienced exclusion from classroom conversations because *sex* was so narrowly defined in this context.

### **Teaching Tolerance and Culture: Expanding Students' Worldviews**

Teachers connected their curriculum to their identifications as allies—not necessarily because they made a point to address gender and sexual diversity in their classes, but because they believed their *approach* to their academic content communicated messages to their students about tolerance and acceptance of all people and that these messages would lead to a general open-mindedness that will affect how students reach out to anyone who is different from them. This component of their professional responsibility was proposed as a response to teachers' perception that many adolescents have difficulty understanding cultures that are different from their own ways of living or appropriately interacting with people who are different from them. This logic places responsibility on schools and educators to provide guidance to adolescents about how to behave in ways that express respect, tolerance, and acceptance. This component of their professional responsibility positions LGBTQ youth as students who experience intolerance

and teachers as people who have power to intervene and diminish the amount of intolerance present in the school environment. Participants described two frameworks for this work: creating opportunities for students to develop tolerant and accepting attitudes, and using relevant components of academic curriculum to challenge students' assumptions and expand their worldviews to encompass a wider range of knowledge about differences in identity, belief, and ways of living.

### **Teaching Tolerance**

*Tolerance* served as a framework for participants to integrate support for LGBTQ students into their narratives about the daily habits of their classroom practice. Teaching tolerance was intertwined with their professional responsibility to “all students,” as both represented strategies and philosophies focused on creating schools where diverse groups of students can learn together. *Tolerance* is a powerful concept in the United States, where it “is held out as the key to peaceful coexistence in racially divided neighborhoods, the potential fabric of community in diversely populated public schools, the corrective for abusive homophobia in the military and elsewhere, and the antidote for rising rates of hate crime” (Brown, 2006, p. 2). It is little wonder, then, that *tolerance* is discussed throughout the data set as the key to improving the school experiences of LGBTQ students and as a tool to be used in response to incidents of bullying or bias. Teachers with experience “teaching tolerance” as part of an effort to improve school climate described two different approaches to this work: character education and bullying intervention.

**Tolerance and character education.** A year before this research began, a boy at Tina's middle school was assaulted at a bus stop. His leg was broken, and when the bus came the assailants and all witnesses got on the bus, leaving the boy behind and not telling the bus driver.

The school hired anti-bullying consultants and engaged in on-going leadership and anti-bullying programs, but Tina decided that she also needed to make focused attempts to increase her students' tolerance of other people, and she expressed a commitment to helping students be people who will express kindness and empathy and not cause harm to others. Her goal was to fill a void that she perceived students to have in their moral and social development—to help them “learn the character attributes that enable them to become caring and responsible adults” (Leming, 2000, p. 414). Her strategies for doing this were to position herself as a model of character and tolerance for students to follow and to incorporate the schools' character education goals—which existed before the student was assaulted—into her classroom routines. Tina said that while she “can't picture myself just talking about [LGBTQ tolerance], like, in class, like bringing up the topic,” she believed that teachers are responsible for modeling tolerance when they witness students expressing LGBTQ bias:

But when it does come up I think we have to be strong, we have to stand up and say, you know, that's not, you know, what the big deal? Or that's not how you, or, you shouldn't be calling something that name. Or, you know, for us to set that example that it's not acceptable and if we hear it in the hall or if we hear it...and the more that that happens, I feel like then the kids start to say, “oh, you know, like, that's not, you know I need to be accepting of all people.” (Interview 3, 6/13/12)

Tina claimed that modeling tolerance for students is a role that requires adults to be “strong” and to “stand up.” This implies that there is a possibility of risk or resistance when one takes the position that LGBTQ people deserve equal rights and respect. As a teacher who was committed to teaching students about tolerance, she positioned herself as someone who was willing to face these possibilities and be persistent, even if she encountered students or colleagues who

disagreed with her. She was also committed to being consistent and believed that, as students heard messages of acceptance and tolerance over and over again from multiple sources, they would begin to understand the value of being “accepting of all people.”

Tina also implemented strategies to incorporate messages of tolerance and acceptance into more contexts than the moments when teachers correct individual behaviors. In the year leading up to Tina’s participation in this research, she had been doing daily journal activities with all her classes that asked students to share their points-of-view on current events, and she hoped that this activity would give students opportunities for reflection and increase their opportunities to observe her behavior and hear how she thinks about issues of diversity. The journal topics were supplied by the local PBS station through a program called *Assignment the World*, which pairs short news clips with discussion questions and writing prompts. Her rationale for this activity was both to encourage her students to write every single day and to include “a little bit of our character building piece [in the class.] Like, where they’re writing, but they’re real life topics and things they really have to think about...as human beings” (Interview 2, 3/14/12). Since adding this element to her day-to-day curriculum, Tina believed she had increased opportunities to share ideas with students and model her own approach to “real life topics”—which gave her a venue to model tolerance and acceptance for her students. One of the observed discussions was in response to a news story about a boy with autism who had been banned from playing Little League baseball because the coach believed he was at risk for getting hurt. Observations occurred that day during first and second period, and student responses included:

(First period) T: “So, what do you think of this news story?” Steve: “I haven’t shared in a while. I think the coach should let him try. Did he even get to try out?” ....T: So, you

think he should get to try?” Steve: “Yeah.” T: “I totally agree. Watching the video, it looks like he can play. I was really bothered by this. We have kids in this building with autism! It bothered me as a parent and as a teacher. I would be fighting it. Maybe the coach could use some training on working with kids with disabilities.

(Second period) Trevor read his journal out loud and said they should let every kid on the team because “we’re all different.” T: “Nice! Good writing, Trevor!” Chris also read his journal...He said any kid could get hurt and it’s wrong not to let him because he’s different. Luke said, “If it was the coach’s kid, would he let him play?” T: “Hmmm. Good point. I have the feeling he’s nervous because he doesn’t know about autism.” Amanda said the parents should meet with the principal, and the team could learn things from having a kid with a disability on the team.” T: “I’m with you. He doesn’t understand. The coach could be educated. As Amanda said, it’s a learning experience.”

One of the dangers of “tolerance” discussions that focus on solving specific incidents of exclusion is that they do not require critical examination of how and why lines have been drawn between “normal” and “different.” Tina recalled this day’s discussions as exemplars of her goals *Assignment the World* discussions. She said that their responses “were really, you know, compassionate” (Interview 3, 6/13/12), which, according to the logic of character education, means that students hold the kinds of attitudes and beliefs that will lead to positive interactions with peers who are “different” in some way (Rigby, 2010). The news story was about a young person who had been marginalized because of his disability, and Tina’s expectation was that students would recognize the injustice of excluding him from a sport and recommend alternative solutions. Students’ responses reflected beliefs and values of good people and good students:

civility, kindness, fairness, and acceptance (Payne & Smith, 2013), and Tina added to their responses by emphasizing the importance of not making assumptions or not making decisions when one lacks knowledge about something like autism. Additionally, she reminded the students that they have peers who have autism and deserve their compassion, and she shared the kinds of action she would take as a parent or as a teacher if something like this was happening in their community. Adding this information raises their awareness about the diversity in their own school and informs them about the possibilities to act against intolerance. However, the discussion did not include critical questions about *why* this student had been interpreted as a safety risk or as an insurmountable challenge for the coaches as the team, nor did it address taken-for-granted definitions of “normal” and “different.” Therefore, “teaching tolerance” served as a way to help students get along and be nice, but it does not directly address issues of inequality and institutional exclusion.

**Tolerance and bullying intervention.** “Teaching tolerance” and “anti-bullying” are buzz words in conversations about creating safe K-12 schools. The two are assumed to work together because the goal of “teaching tolerance” (increasing kindness, acceptance, and civility) is understood to support the goal of anti-bullying (decrease the number of violent incidents). Megan paired these two concepts in her response to a report that one of her seventh grade students was being targeted as a “fag.” She decided to make changes to her curriculum so she could integrate themes of tolerance and anti-bullying. The student’s mother recommended *The Misfits* as a text that would be relatable for students. The novel is set in the seventh grade, and the four main characters are the “misfits” whose experiences serve as tools to explore themes like sameness versus difference, bullying, and social exclusion, and using literature to shape these conversations provided opportunities to connect curriculum to students’ school experiences

and stimulate conversations about creating a more accepting and respectful climate for all. Megan's description of her planning illustrates how she synthesized tolerance and violence prevention materials to give students information that she believed would lead them toward ending bullying behaviors:

So I got some materials together. I got the No Name Calling stuff. I went to Tolerance.org. I pulled up a whole bunch of wonderful PSAs (public service announcements) about kids that had been bullied. Some that committed suicide, some that didn't. The things that would really make the kids think. I pulled together some poems off of a website of student poetry that was about bullying. I pulled together some music from contemporary artists that's about [bullying] and I got the lyrics and stuff. Had the kids color mark poems and lyrics, looking for, um, key figurative language and that kind of stuff. We looked at PSAs. I had [a lawyer] come in from the District Attorney's Office. He's the chief assistant District Attorney. He came in. He talked about cyber bullying and the law. (Interview 1, 3/8/12)

Megan's description of her teaching and her students' learning is an example of how the dominant public narrative of anti-bullying shapes educators' approach to talking to students about creating more positive social climates in schools. This narrative defines the problem of peer-to-peer targeting in a specific way: social dynamics of aggression are understood in terms of a bully/victim binary relationship; students who bully are aggressive because they lack adequate social skills or they lack tolerance for people who are "different"; the effects of bullying are so harmful that they could lead a victim to self-harm; persistent bullying can rise to the level of harassment—which means legal consequences for the bully; and schools are unsafe when bullies are present (Payne & Smith, 2013). The resources Megan listed represent a collection of highly

publicized tools for teachers who want to engage their students in conversations about what bullying is, what happens to the victims, and why the behaviors need to stop. In general, these resources assume bullying to be behaviors of children who have not had adequate guidance in their social development, and they aim to teach the students how to interact with “different” peers in civil and respectful ways. However, rather than engage students in conversations about who gets targeted with bullying and why, these resources simply implore students to *stop* aggressive behavior because it is unkind and can lead to severe emotional consequences for victims. For example, The No Name Calling materials include a “no bullying” pledge where students vow to never target their peers. The public service announcements and poetry about bullying provided students with examples of victims’ perspectives, and Megan hoped hearing these perspectives would “really make kids think” and help them develop empathy. The District Attorney informed students about the threat of severe legal consequences for cyber bullying or harassment. Collectively, these materials provided students with a picture of the awful things that happen to bullies and victims, but they did not examine why bullying and intolerance happen in the first place.

The inclusion of a gay character in the book created opportunities to directly address the problem of bullying and intolerance that targets gay students and the common practice of using homophobic epithets like “fag” to target any student who is perceived to be “different.” From Megan’s perspective, one of the biggest successes of the bullying unit was students expressing more openness towards forming friendships with students who are different from them, particularly the gay character:

They came away with a positive feeling for the characters in the book even though they had these idiosyncrasies and shortcomings that were pronounced in the book. You know?



Because a lot of them said at the end, you know, "I really wish that I could get to know these people better" kind of things, you know? Like I can be friends with Joe and Joe was the character in the book that was quite gay, almost effeminate gay. But, "he was so cool about it," they said, and he was so content with his own person. (Interview 1, 3/8/12)

*The Misfits* supports the dominant bullying narrative because it raises the audience's awareness of and empathy for the "different" student without troubling the taken-for-granted "truth" that students who occupy particular social positions will naturally be socially powerful in a school while others—the gay kid, the chubby kid—will not. Megan's language for describing her own understanding of the social positioning of the "misfits" is indicative of subtle, persistent Othering of students whose identities do not align with the social norms of their school context. Labeling the misfits' differences as "idiosyncrasies" and "shortcomings" communicates the message that empathizing with these characters or feeling affection for them occurs *in spite of* their differences, not because the lines between "normal" and "different" have been troubled in any significant way. More specifically, describing Joe as "quite gay" and "effeminate gay" emphasizes the masculine gender expectations and social norms that he is not meeting, and he is positioned as a character who had to overcome his gender failure to earn the approval of the reader.

Megan's pedagogical choices for the bullying unit did important work because they initiated conversations that are too rare in K-12 classrooms: students talked about things like the awful experience of being the victim of bullying and about wanting to be friends with someone like Joe, the gay character from *The Misfits*. Megan's focus on thinking about the consequences of one's actions and considering the points-of-view of the students who are "different" pushed kids to be more aware of the harmful effects of teasing or other targeting behaviors. This line of

discussion did not, however, address the cultural roots of being a misfit—i.e. being denied social power. This phenomenon is evidence of systems of gender policing through which students who do not conform to idealized masculine or feminine expectations are “policed by their peers and denied access to social power and popularity, while those who conform are ‘celebrated’” (Payne & Smith, 2012, p. 188). Megan’s students acquired a wide range of knowledge about bullying behaviors and consequences, but they did not learn about why bullying is so prevalent in their culture or possibilities for disrupting the cultural pattern beyond stopping the bad behavior.

### **Broadening Students’ Cultural Knowledge**

In addition to developing students’ openness to difference by teaching them about the values of tolerance and empathy, participants reported that they contributed to the goal of creating better school environments for LGBTQ students by teaching students about identities and lifestyles that students do not know from personal experience. Specifically, these teachers claimed that they teach students about history and *culture*—a word used to describe ways of living or being in the world that are presumably different from dominant (White, cisgender, heterosexual, middle class, able bodied) students’ experiences in their homes and communities. The teachers believe that curriculum can be presented in ways that encourage students to ask questions, doubt, and disagree with injustice or appreciate values or ways of living that are not the norm in their local communities or in the United States. Students who experience curriculum that broadens their knowledge about cultures and identities within and beyond their own communities were believed to be more likely to be open to and find value in diversity—like the “diversity” LGBTQ students add to the school community.

**Historical context of intolerance.** The teachers who used the concept of *culture* to describe their approaches for teaching tolerance were all humanities teachers, and they provided

discipline-specific examples of the opportunities within the academic curriculum to challenge students' assumptions and stereotypes and to increase their knowledge about historical and cultural differences. Paula reported that she used her United States history and world history curricula as vehicles for teaching students both about the diversity within the United States and about different cultural traditions around the world. She claimed that students could learn lessons of tolerance in her class that would improve the school experiences of LGBTQ students, even if she did not explicitly mention the experiences of LGBTQ (gay) people:

[My role is,] I do feel like, just teaching tolerance in all ways. Um, and not even, like I said, having to bring up, "Oh today we're gonna talk about what it means to be gay and how we should accept people who are gay." But just this idea of tolerance as a United States, as a community in [School Community] versus other schools....Um, and so, just the idea of general tolerance. Um, I'd like to, you know, we do talk it about it in class. I give examples of [intolerance] in history and things like that. And we talk about pros and cons and the whys, and if they understand why people hate, then I feel like they understand their own opinions a little bit better as to say well, "Do I? Am I like that?" Or, "Am I not?" (Interview 2, 6/18/12)

According to Paula, there are opportunities within social studies curriculum to teach about the function and value of tolerance on local, national, and international levels, and to show students examples of how and why hatred and intolerance have existed between groups of people throughout history. She believed that such conversations provide students with opportunities to position themselves in relation to historical episodes of hatred or intolerance. Notably, these examples of intolerance are often included in history books because they involved prolific violence and political conflict. Students are, therefore, discussing tolerance in the context of

events where dominant groups performed their power by targeting the oppressed with physical violence—i.e. lynching, murder, or genocide. Thus, students are understood to be solidifying their “opinions” about tolerance or acceptance and deciding how their own positions relate to historically famous intolerance as they learn the narratives of violent victimization—narratives that ultimately evoke empathy for the oppressed but do not necessarily encourage students to imagine the structural changes that would have to occur for victims to have the same access to power as the oppressors.

Social studies curriculum also provided Paula with tools to address students’ biases or stereotypes as they come up in class, either by drawing students’ attention to the history of the biases and stereotypes they are reproducing or by reminding students of the legal framework for equal rights in the United States:

I have seen a lot of kids very, um, bad opinions about Muslim people....But, you know, “A-rab” drives me up a wall. “Japs.” I’m like, okay, those are... those were okay in, you know, World War II it was okay to say that...but now it’s got an anger connotation for it. Like, you guys have to be very careful. If you have your opinions that’s okay, but you don’t want to also target or stereotype.

Um, so, and it’s more just explaining than it is telling them, “no you’re wrong.” It’s just saying, “well here’s some things you should know before you say things like that.” And walking them through it. With their little hands held. (laughs) So yeah, those are a few big ones that I think I’ve heard. You know, “They shouldn’t be able to build a mosque down in New York [near the site of the World Trade Center].” I couldn’t believe...I couldn’t believe it. I go, “We just read the First Amendment!”... I go, “yes, there’s an

argument for it, but what are the arguments for it? Now let's talk about it." You know, and so balancing that a little bit. (Interview 1, 11/16/12)

Using a word like "Japs" or expressing hostility towards the rights of Muslims to exercise religious freedom were both understood to be examples of students taking up and repeating language without fully understanding it. Paula's responses to students' intolerant language and behavior reflects an understanding of "tolerance...as a tool for managing or lessening...hostility to achieve peaceful coexistence" (Brown, 2006, p. 151). In both of these examples, students reproduced stereotypes that she interpreted to be "bad opinions" or instances of students using cultural labels without understanding their historical significance or the consequences of using such words. Her responses were attempts to address and minimize hostility using the historical and political lessons they have learned in her class. She did not believe it was productive to tell them, "no you're wrong" when they expressed bias toward specific cultural groups. Instead, she provided them with information to remind them of the historical origins of the biased speech they were repeating or showed them how social studies learning connected to the ideas they were expressing about current events.

Notably, Paula's description of teaching tolerance by engaging students with historical and political contexts for their opinions did not include integrating the experiences and accomplishments of LGBTQ people into her U.S. and world history curricula. In fact, she resisted the idea that doing so is necessary because she believed that teaching a broad framework of tolerance would translate to students learning to be tolerant to anyone who is different from them. This is common practice in schools—encouraging students to be tolerant of "differences" without "suggestion that the differences are negotiated, have been socially and historically constituted and are themselves the effect of power and hegemonic norms, or even of certain

discourses about race, ethnicity, sexuality, and culture” (Brown, 2006, p. 16). In other words, students hear frequent messages about how “good” people behave toward and think about people who are different from them. They do not learn about how and why certain identity categories are marginalized in their own school and community or the social, historical, and political contexts of these phenomena. Instead, students learn to “accept” or “tolerate” everyone without discussing who is in the position to be *tolerant*, who must be *tolerated*, and why that social dynamic exists.

**“Other” cultures and LGBTQ inclusion.** Youdell (2011) argues that schools are sites where “wider economic, political and social issues are played out through organizational structures and systems” (p. 7). Teachers may feel compelled to “play safe” (p. 86) in their decisions to enter conversations about social or political issues that are believed to be contentious or controversial, or they may feel there is little opportunity to engage—believing “there is little space to think, let alone act, in radical ways” (p. 86). In this research, teachers who decided to include LGBTQ identities in their curriculum found “space” in their formal curriculum where they believed LGBTQ inclusion was appropriate or logical. Teachers rarely spoke about efforts to purposefully insert LGBTQ identities and experiences into curriculum, but those who did related these decisions to the broader goals of teaching students to accept, respect, and increase their knowledge about differences. Karen’s strategy for including LGBTQ identities in her foreign language curriculum was to do “very, very subtle things” that were intended to push the boundaries of students’ definitions of “normal” or expand students’ knowledge about human differences:

I have a Power Point for, we’re doing [language related to] house and home and a lot of vocabulary...and it happened to have a picture of, um, a family but it was two

women...And the kids went berserk when they saw that. And I happen to have a boy in the class who has two, two moms. So, I was *really* nervous about that one. (*her emphasis*)

And when that slide came up, it like took three seconds before they were like, wait a minute... And then they were like “AHHH” (*mimics class’s reaction*)...And, um, but they all laughed and I said, “What’s the matter? What’s the matter? It’s a family! It’s a perfectly normal family!” And I happened to show that same, that same slide show two more times. And they’re all like waiting for the slide. They’re on their seats waiting for the slide, and they go “It’s a family!!” You know, so they all kind of chimed in. So they know what I’m thinking. (Interview 1, 11/9/11)

Adding an image of a same sex couple to a routine lesson will likely not prove to be “radical,” but it is an example of how “gaps can be found into which disallowed knowledges can be inserted and critical pedagogies pursued” (Youdell, 2011, p. 86). In this example, Karen added an image of a lesbian couple into a routine activity in her classroom—a Power Point presentation about new vocabulary words. This action was a “subtle” expression of her belief that the image represented a “perfectly normal family,” and by including it she exposed and challenged heteronormative assumptions about family structures. It was also a “subtle” strategy for her to recognize and express support for students who have LGBTQ parents. While she claimed this was a “subtle” way to introduce LGBTQ identities, her nervousness about doing it indicates that she felt there was risk involved in her decision—possibly because she feared consequences from school leaders, because she worried about her students’ reactions, or because she worried about how her student who has gay parents would feel. Further, the students’ loud, shocked responses illustrate how the stigmatization of LGBTQ identities manifests in classrooms. The “abnormal” family image stimulated gasps and laughter, and her response was to communicating her

expectations for how students should interpret images of same-sex couples: “It’s a perfectly normal family!” While this pedagogical strategy challenged the status quo of family imagery, it did not push students to explicitly examine why they were shocked to see a lesbian couple included in a presentation about family life. Their eagerness to mimic her message that it is a picture of a “normal family” illustrates how LGBTQ families are not “normal” at all, and the students’ laughter remained a socially approved response to the image of a “different” family.

Examples of teachers seeking “gaps” to challenge students’ heteronormative assumptions or insert LGBTQ identities into their curriculum were rare in this study. The teachers who did this work described it as “subtle” or seamlessly related to broader curricular goals. Karen narrated her pedagogical decisions within such a framework when providing another example of her “subtle” methods for addressing LGBTQ issues in her German language classroom. Throughout her courses she teaches about German culture, and this “normal” daily classroom practice provides opportunities to teach students about Germany’s comparatively progressive social norms around issues of marriage and LGBTQ rights:

Germans don’t care in general. In Germany, I, you know, there’s been gay marriage for a long time there. People don’t even get married period. Men and women don’t get married. They just don’t bother anymore in Germany. And it’s all like, it’s pretty much you do what you think is good for you, and we’re okay with that. You know? And, um, I, you know, I voice my political beliefs and my societal beliefs. I think I’ve told you this—sort of in subtle ways. ‘Cause I don’t want to, you know, get called out by having a gay agenda or anything. Um, and I have, you know, I think I’ve also told you I’ve had a lot of kids from conservative families. Um, so I have to be careful, but we talk about the German culture, and I, I say that’s just how it is there, and it seems like a good system to



me. You know, so they get the idea, and I think just the nature of talking about culture in general allows the conversation to flow in that type of direction. And it allows us to say, “We’re okay.” You know, “you should be, too.” (Interview 3, 6/21/12)

This example of connecting LGBTQ curricular inclusion to “cultural” discussions provides insight to the layers of negotiation teachers manage when they decide to talk about LGBTQ identities with their students. Karen’s goal was for her students to “get the idea” that strict heteronormative rules for marriage and relationships are not the same in all places around the world and that the strict social norms in the United States were neither necessary nor ideal. For Karen, this was a “careful” or “subtle” way to introduce the idea of LGBTQ rights and express her views about the issue because she was integrating this topic into the taken-for-granted language classroom practice of comparing United States’ cultural practices to those in countries where the language is spoken. By using the opportunities in her curriculum to introduce students to new, unfamiliar, and *successful* possibilities for policies, practices, and belief systems related to LGBTQ people and their rights, Karen found space to talk about LGBTQ identities without drawing criticism from parents or administrators who might believe she was pushing an agenda. Significantly, this was possible as long as she framed the conversation in terms of her *opinions* about the success or “rightness” of German cultural practice. She would not be able to say that the Germans are absolutely right or are a better society than the United States because that would be perceived as pushing an “agenda” or trying to change students’ minds.

Susan—another language teacher—had a similar story about comparisons between US and European culture serving as an avenue for introducing new possibilities for families and relationships:

Or even just talking about, um, you know, marriage practices in France, The Pact is an agreement that two people make to be basically co-habitational, um, without really being married, and that exists a lot in Europe, and, you know, talking about what that is because there's nothing like that in the States, um, and how it was meant to serve a certain population – it was meant to serve homosexuals who were interested in having the rights of spouses but now many heterosexual couples are doing the same thing as well, because why go through the whole process of a full marriage? You know? You get all the benefits, and it's just a little bit less. And kind of modern. (Interview 1, 11/20/11)

Like Karen, Susan experienced classroom discussions about marriage and family life in Europe as opportunities to expand students' understanding about the possibilities for committed relationships and challenge their heteronormative assumptions about the possibilities for legally and socially normative relationships. In the U.S., marriage and family are the symbols of success for healthy, mature adults, and these symbols are deeply invested in binary constructions of gender and heteronormative assumptions about the possibilities for desire, compatibility, stability, and commitment. Discussing marriage and civil partnership laws in Germany and France provides such gaps because the differences in policy and social norms between these countries and the U.S. provide students with examples of social contexts where cultural investment in heterosexual marriage is less powerful and things like gay marriage are not contentious political issues. Thus, by choosing to push the curriculum beyond the German or French vocabulary related to marriage and family, both teachers found and pursued “gaps” to “intervene in hegemonic forms of normative sex-gender” or “troubl[e] ‘proper’ sex-gender” (Youdell, 2011, p. 96).

The teachers who used “culture” as a framework for describing their efforts to teach students about LGBTQ identities and experiences both expressed that their positions as foreign language teachers provided them with unique opportunities to introduce students to non-normative identities and experiences. Karen claimed that all foreign language teachers are “a little bit gay” (Interview 2, 4/4/12) because “we talk about other cultures. And we talk about lifestyles and...you know, it’s in some ways like a sociology course, too, because we, we touch upon how people live” (Interview 3, 6/21/12). Labeling the herself and her foreign language colleagues “a little bit gay” indicates that she and her colleagues are a little bit different from other academic departments in her school. Their interest in learning about different cultures and different ways of living, from her perspective, not a “normal” way to think about teaching and learning in her school. This interest in new perspectives and new possibilities, along with the content of her curriculum, contributed to her support for LGBTQ students because her job is to teach students to take an inclusive position toward identities and experiences that are *outside the norms of the school*.

Susan also believed teaching a language naturally lends itself to conversations about human diversity, but described how this happens in her class as “inadvertent” rather than as a “subtle” or “careful” strategy.

Um, yeah, [LGBTQ identities come up] really through, like, inadvertent cultural projects that my students do....I...do this project with my...Level 3 students, and it's based on a cemetery in Paris. And they each choose a famous person who's buried in the cemetery and do a little biography about this person and then we do a ghost talk, where they have to dress up as the character and come back and talk to us about their life, kind of thing. Um, and there's a wide spectrum of artists, everything buried in this cemetery, and while

students were researching, you know, I had one girl that chose the writer Colette. And she, you know, was like, “Oh my gosh! She had a, a lesbian relationship!” Then somebody else did Gertrude Stein. You know, um, Oscar Wilde. You know. All these people who are buried in the cemetery. So I'd say that that's where...in terms of curriculum, it, it comes up in class. And, I, I welcome it. You know? It, it's kind of great to be like, “Yeah, so? Yeah! Yeah! Oscar Wilde was accused of being a homosexual. Yeah! What happened about it?” And the kids are kind of fascinated by it. And it's great too because when they pick the names, they have no idea. You know, I know the girls are thinking, “Oh, Colette. She's a girl. I'm going to do her because I can get dressed up like her.” You know? And that's what they're thinking, so I kind of am glad because it's not like, you know, “The gay student chose the gay person to do.” (Interview 1, 11/20/11)

Susan's cemetery project required students to research the lives of people whose names might be familiar to students, but the details of their lives and accomplishments have likely not been included in their school experiences thus far. Susan was in a position where she knew that some students would research people who identified as LGBTQ or whose lives relate to queer history in some way. However, she did not make that known when students were choosing subjects for their research. Instead, she allowed students to discover these things through their own research rather than label the research options as “gay writer” or “lesbian poet.” Students' surprise at discovering queerness in their research was indicative of the “prevailing view” (Atkinson & DePalma, 2006, p. 333) that queer identities are not to be discussed in K-12 contexts: they almost cannot believe that they were given an assignment that includes learning about LGBTQ people. Susan resisted their surprise and encouraged them to pursue learning as much as possible about their “ghost.” This is an interesting approach because she created possibilities for bringing

marginalized stories to the attention of students who were unlikely to intentionally choose an LGBTQ-identified person for a school project. However, describing this possibility as “inadvertent” distanced her from responsibility for any gender or sexuality discussions that may arise from student research—students were not required to pursue the queerness in their “ghosts” lives and were allowed to decide for themselves if they wanted to include such content in their projects. She “welcomes” queer content when it becomes visible, but she did not do anything to make sure it appears. If it did appear, it safely fit into the discussions of “different” people, cultures, and lifestyles that any language student is expected to experience.

### **Possibilities and Limitations of Ally Pedagogy**

When participants spoke about being a teacher ally and creating optimal learning environments for LGBTQ students, they agreed on one critical point: supporting LGBTQ students occurs through day-to-day approaches to curriculum, instruction, and developing relationships with their students. Participants offered few examples of explicitly including LGBTQ identities and experiences in curriculum, but they presented two pedagogical priorities that they understand to be essential to the project of LGBTQ-inclusive schools: (1) comfortable classroom communities where students trust their teacher and where there is minimal threat of emotional distress; and (2) curriculum and instruction focused on expanding students’ worldviews to include knowledge identities, beliefs, and experiences beyond those they have known within their own schools and communities. These priorities are intimately related because they both imagine school spaces where students are free to express their identities without fear of consequences. In such spaces, all students participate academically and socially, respect one another unconditionally, and pursue common learning goals. Collectively, they form a

pedagogical framework that relies on the assumption that broad, unspecific lessons about respect and tolerance will naturally lead to improved school experiences for LGBTQ students.

The *ally pedagogy* presented in this data is one that has been envisioned in a cultural context where *safe space* and *anti-bullying* are the dominant narratives for solving the problem of school-based LGBTQ victimization in the United States. Both call on teachers to be aware of the possibility that LGBTQ students will be the targets of verbal and physical violence and that such violence is the result of intolerance. Further, these narratives define the role of the teacher ally: she takes action when she witnesses homophobic actions and sets a standard for tolerance and acceptance in her classroom. As Fox (2007) argues, “The discourse of safe space reproduces [the hetero/homo] dichotomy through an inclusion model that focuses on homophobia, suggesting that allies give, provide, offer, and secure safe space for LGBTQ people” (p. 501). The pedagogy discussed in this chapter can, therefore, be understood as teachers’ interpretations of this call to action, as allies hold the “normative authority...to be the agent configuring what the [safe] spaces might be” (p. 501). The teacher allies provided multiple examples of pedagogical strategies that contribute to the goal of providing and securing safe space. These efforts related to increasing comfort in the classroom and broadening students’ cultural knowledge certainly make positive contributions to LGBTQ students’ quality of life in school, but the rarity of teachers’ engagement with gender and sexual diversity remains a startling absence in narratives and classroom practice of participants who identify as allies for LGBTQ students.

## **Chapter 6: HETERONORMATIVE GENDER ROLES IN TEACHER ALLIES' CLASSROOMS**

Schools' investment in heterosexual identity—in envisioning successful student development in terms of binary gender and future heterosexual family life—is a contextual element that has been conspicuously under-examined in research on teacher support for LGBTQ students. This means that very little is known about how heterosexuality and gender normativity continue to be privileged in classrooms of teachers who consciously act in the interest of LGBTQ youth. Although there is a growing body of literature on the challenges LGBTQ youth experience in school spaces, much of this scholarship has focused specifically on LGBTQ victimization and risk for negative health and educational outcomes (Birkett et al., 2009; Espelage et al., 2008; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Rivers, 2011; Swearer et al., 2008). Likewise, much of the literature on the teachers' engagement with LGBTQ students' needs focuses on the likelihood that teachers will intervene when they witness homophobic acts (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2009 & 2011; Meyer, 2008) and the importance LGBTQ students place on having teachers who are accepting of gender and sexual diversity (Kosciw et al., 2009 & 2011). Correlations have been drawn between the presence of supportive educators and improved educational outcomes for LGBTQ youth (Kosciw et al., 2009 & 2011). On the whole, this scholarship has illustrated the prevalence of homophobic acts and attitudes in schools and proposed the argument that teachers can make a difference in the school lives of LGBTQ youth. This focus on bias intervention and prevention has produced a significant gap in research on LGBTQ-supportive teachers: education research has failed to explore if and how the privileging of heterosexuality and traditional gender expression is reproduced through teacher allies' day-to-day pedagogy. This is a critical point for research on teacher support for LGBTQ youth because it will potentially increase knowledge about how the reproduction of strict gender norms and the

Othering of non-normative genders and sexualities manifest in classroom interactions, curriculum, and teaching practice.

One of the most significant findings of this research was students' and teachers' strict adherence to traditional gender roles. Rigid gender norms are cultural foundations of gender-based and sexual harassment that LGBTQ students experience in schools (Pascoe, 2013; Ringrose & Renold, 2010) and "many bullying behaviors are rooted in reinforcing the 'rules' for 'appropriate' gender behavior" (Payne & Smith, 2013, p. 21). Students learn these gender rules throughout their schooling experiences, and they measure themselves and one another against idealized constructs of masculinity and femininity (Payne & Smith, 2013). LGBTQ students are at particular risk for being targeted and vilified for their gender "failures" and, therefore, stand to benefit from school environments where these rigid gender rules are called into question. Classrooms are potential sites for critical, transformative work where teachers and students critically question and destabilize rigid gender categories. However, participating teachers and their students adhered to the status quo, and issues such as gender stereotypes, sexism, or heterosexism, or male privilege were hardly mentioned.

In this chapter, I will examine how traditional binary gender categories shaped participating teachers' and students' classroom interactions. Teachers' interpretations of who their students are or how they should effectively teach were often reliant on assumptions about boys' and girls' different learning needs. These gendered differences were presented as common sense, and they reproduced stereotypical ideas about girls being more emotionally vulnerable and boys being physically active and unfocused. Additionally, reliance on taken-for-granted gender differences allowed boys' performances of male privilege to dominate the social interactions in many classrooms. Whether teachers acknowledged the presence of a "boy problem," ignored it,



or were oblivious, classroom disruptions caused by boys' volume and physical movement were present in the majority of classroom observations. Additionally, teachers' own classroom performances and understanding of good teaching practice were shaped by heteronormative gender norms. Their narratives about good teaching practice and professional challenges provided insight to some of the ways that teacher identity and gender intersect. Overall, the reproduction of strict gender roles in teacher allies' classrooms limited the possibilities for non-normative gender and sexual identities to be present and visible in classrooms that, according to participants, were safe and comfortable for LGBTQ youth.

### **Quiet Girls and Active Boys**

The presence of gender stereotyping and gender-based assumptions about student identities and behavior in teachers' pedagogy is crucial to questions about inclusive schools for LGBTQ youth. When gender norms circulate in this way—whether consciously or unconsciously—they regulate the possibilities for socially acceptable gender identity and expression (Payne & Smith, 2013). Challenging restrictive gender norms is, therefore, a critical step in creating school spaces that value LGBTQ students. However, this was not routine practice in the participating teachers' classrooms or a topic that emerged in teachers' narratives about their pedagogy. Instead, most talk about gender occurred through statements about the differences they experienced between groups of students based on what they knew or believed about the needs, preferences, characteristics, or nature of boys and girls. Classes with a lot of boys were described as loud or hard to manage, and classes with a lot of girls were quieter, generally more compliant in response to teacher direction, and less likely to be distracted from schoolwork. These patterns persisted in classes with more balanced gender demographics. Regardless of the number of boys or girls in the room, it was considered normal for boys to

interrupt teachers and peers or to show off their knowledge by shouting out answers, and it was considered normal for girls to either hide or be insecure about their academic abilities. These classroom gender roles were reflected in teachers' management styles, their descriptions of students, and their pedagogical decisions.

### **“Boy” Classes and “Girl” Classes**

Participants who taught classes that were disproportionately male or female emphasized differences between their experiences of teaching boys and girls more than other participants. Kelly had a schedule that included one class that was boy-dominated (16 boys, 3 girls) and another that was girl-dominant (16 girls, 4 boys), and she frequently compared these classes to illustrate the stark differences in her teaching experiences throughout a typical school day. She said, “I think it feels very different” to be a teacher for the two groups of students, and she claimed she had to “be a different person” for each of her classes. In the “girl” class, most of the students had a history of struggling to be successful in science classes and received academic support services to help them be successful in school. She understood her role for this group to be that of a teacher who provides emotional care and helps them overcome insecurity:

The girls....I almost feel like they, I, I have like a mother role to them. Like, it's, you know, I have to be, like, very nurturing. They need a lot of, um, you know, support. You know, any little thing that they do right, you know, requires extreme praise, and then any little thing that they do wrong you kinda just have to, you know, look over it because I think their, their self-confidence as students is so low. And I think most of that is being a [academic support program] student, not being a girl. (Interview 2, 3/7/12)

Kelly's interpretation of these students was shaped by the intersecting positions of *girl* who has been labeled *remedial student*. These girls' potential has been minimized through their schools'

official marking of their academic struggles. Students in this class frequently asked Kelly to check their work with questions such as “am I doing this right?” For example, on a day when students were completing an assignment that asked them to graph some data, the following interactions occurred between Kelly and her students within a five-minute period.

9:57AM: Female Student 5 (F5) walked to Kelly’s desk at the front of the room and showed her her paper. K: “Good!” F6 asked a question from her seat. Kelly remained seated and answered. (The girl’s seat was directly in front of the teacher’s desk and facing of her.) F7 and F8 walked to Kelly’s desk, one right after the other, to show Kelly their graphs. K: “Yep. Very nice.” F5 and F7 walked to her desk together to ask another question.

9:59AM: Kelly to the class: “Everything you’re doing today is multiplying. Don’t divide anything.” [OC: *Her announcement seemed to be in response to students’ questions in the past few minutes.*] F9 walked to Kelly’s desk, showed her the paper and said: “Did I do this right?” Not all girl students, but most, walked up to check with her during the time she provided to complete the assignment. The boys worked alone and talked to each other a small amount. Only 3 boys in class, and they’re all at the same table. (field notes, 1/25/12)

This particular class was a girl-dominated space, and as such the girls’ needs and demands shaped most classroom interactions. As Kelly described in her interviews, this group of students asked many questions when working on assignments and frequently requested reassurance that they were doing their work correctly. Girls’ repeated questions of “Did I do this right?” or asking Kelly to check their work reflects a long tradition of research findings that report girls are

socialized to express less confidence in their academic abilities and to avoid the risk of being wrong (AAUW, 2010; Orenstein, 1994). Kelly's approach to developing their confidence and academic abilities was to be "nurturing," provide extreme praise, and be sensitive to their emotions when correcting their mistakes. Kelly claimed that she spent more time providing such support for this group of students than any other, and in all observations she was responsive to every single girl's request for reassurance about her work. This interpretation of girls' needs assumed a close relationship between emotional needs and academic needs, and it followed the logic that girls need to feel safe and supported in order to develop confidence to complete intellectual tasks.

The common critique of single-gender educational contexts is that they exacerbate and reinforce gender stereotypes (Halpern et al., 2011). Interpreting girls as sensitive and more in need of nurturing than their male peers was an example of this trap because it lacked critical awareness of how the emotional realm of human experience is feminized, and therefore devalued, in patriarchal culture. It also overlooked possibilities for girls to have different kinds of needs or to express their needs in ways that do not match this feminine stereotype. However, it is notable that this girl-dominated class also served as a space where girls do not hesitate to vocalize their needs or participate in class discussion. This was the only group of students in the entire study where girls interrupted to ask the teacher questions during direct instruction while boys remained silent. This group was observed on days when Kelly lectured about bodily systems, and on each day the girls' asked spontaneous questions throughout class:

Kelly started presenting the nervous system notes, modeling the note taking on the Smart Board. She told them about the central and peripheral nervous systems, and she told them that the central nervous system is made up of the brain and spinal cord. There was a

diagram on their note sheet and she modeled how to label the diagram. F6: “If you injure yourself, you’re injured all the way down?” [*OC: She meant paralyzed.*] Kelly explained the difference between paraplegic and quadraplegic. F3: “What would happen if someone elbowed you really hard right here?” (She turned in her chair so Kelly could see where she was pointing on her back—a spot on her spinal cord.) Kelly told her that there is a back bone that protects the spinal cord. Severe spinal injuries happen in car accidents. (field notes, 1/25/12).

Rather than respond to their questions as if they were interruptions or a behavioral problem that needed to be managed, Kelly incorporated them into the content of her lecture. Orenstein (1994) argues that spontaneous speaking in class is typically dominated by boys, and it is important to increase these opportunities for girls because “speaking out in class—and being acknowledged for it—is a constant reinforcement of a student’s right to be heard...[it enhances] self-esteem through exposure to praise; [and students] have the luxury of learning from mistakes” (p. 12). Kelly’s responses to their questions encouraged the students’ enthusiasm and validated the personal connections they are making to the curriculum. This pedagogical practice served two purposes. First, she was able to attend to the girls’ emotional needs by showing she was interested in their perspectives and sensitive to their questions. Second, it created opportunities for her to engage girls in academic experiences that would potentially develop their confidence to vocalize questions and observations in other contexts.

In contrast to Kelly’s experiences of encouraging girls to speak and be more active in the classroom, teachers who had mostly-male classes were keenly aware of the ways that they changed their teaching practice to both accommodate and minimize the noise and disruptions that were accepted as normal when teaching a lot of boys. Kelly compared her professional

persona in the girl-dominated class to her persona in the boy class, and in contrast to her attentiveness to girls' feelings and self-confidence around their academic work, the boys' class required her to focus more energy on behavior management:

But, um, in the afternoon [boy] class sometimes I feel like I'm like a referee because they, they are just so high energy, and they're great kids and they're really smart and they want to work, but they require a lot of micromanaging... 'Cause they can get off task very easily. Whereas the morning [girl] class, I could give them an assignment and I could leave the room (laughing) and come back and they would still be, you know, diligently doing what they were supposed to do. And, you know, whereas the guys would have set up a basketball hoop and we would have, like, a game of some sort. (Interview 2, 3/7/12)

There are two points of significant contrast in Kelly's comparison of her experiences teaching boy- and girl-dominant classes. First, her interpretations of boys (smart, high energy) and girls (quiet, diligent, lower self-confidence) reproduce heteronormative gender norms, a lens through which it is unproblematic for girls to be quiet, compliant, and still or boys to be smart, capable, louder, and physically active. She did not mention students who challenged or deviated from these gendered behavior patterns—girls or boys who did not align with the gendered behavior patterns of their peers—nor did she question how or why these rigidly gendered ways of being in a classroom came to be. Second, Kelly presented her role as “referee” in opposition to her motherly experiences of teaching the class of mostly girls. When she was teaching the girls, her attention and energy were focused on boosting students' self-esteem and helping them feel like they were capable and smart. She did not have to worry about turning her back or leaving them unsupervised because they are students who follow instructions and operate within the boundaries of good classroom behavior—minimal noise and movement. In contrast, the role of

“referee” in the boy-dominated class implies that she spent significant time and energy regulating male impulses. Student self-confidence was not mentioned as a concern for this group.

An example of this occurred when some boys were not being directly supervised before class:

Kelly stood at the classroom door during passing period [5 minutes between periods when students move to their next class]. Male Student 1 (M1) (blonde, glasses, a new student since the last time I visited) was standing by the windows on the opposite side of the room from where Kelly was standing. He picked up one of the yardsticks from the counter under the window and started swinging it around. *[OC: like a sword]* Another student joined him. K was talking with other students near the classroom door; she looked into the classroom and said: “Gentlemen, no.” She shook her head slightly and they put the yardsticks back on the counter. (field notes, 2/29/12)

Kelly presented being “high energy” as normal boy behavior, and her calm response to the boys playing with the yardsticks suggested she was not necessarily surprised to witness male students using her classroom supplies to create a game. The boys responded immediately, which allowed them to remain in the realm of good behavior. Identifying herself as a “referee” for these students implies that being a good teacher for boys requires placing limits on students’ energetic activity. She called this “micromanaging” because she had to limit the boys’ opportunities to make independent choices about how they will spend class time. Leaving them unsupervised is out of the question because the boys demand supervision and regulation that the girls do not.

When teachers reported altering their teaching practice to account for boys’ behavior, they were almost always referring to actions that were intended to minimize opportunities for boys to interrupt, pull class discussion off topic, or move around the classroom. Laura was

another teacher who said that she altered her teaching strategies for different groups of students, and like Kelly she tailored her teaching practice to manage or control male students' behavior.

I like being able to have a little bit of fun but still do your work. And let's be silly but okay, let's pull it in right now and get serious about what we have to do. And I like that. My ninth period class with all those boys, the young boys...it was very, very difficult. If you [give] a little bit, just a little bit silly, poof! They were gone. And it was very hard to pull them back in. So especially the last couple of weeks [end of the school year], I found myself pulling it in and not showing as much humor, because I knew that if I let a little bit go they'd be all gone. And, and so I didn't like it quite as much but I knew I had to if I could just, if I had to get through the material and keep them on track, you know?

(Interview 3, 6/14/12)

Laura's preferred classroom practice was to combine "fun" with her chemistry curriculum, and throughout the study she described examples of adding humor and fun to her classes by connecting curriculum to stories about her work as a lab chemist, demonstrating chemical reactions, or using props to illustrate scientific concepts. These were teaching strategies where the objective was to create opportunities for students to enjoy and connect to science curriculum, and in order to facilitate that Laura had to release control and create space for expressions of excitement and emotion. However, when working with groups of mostly male students, she found it necessary to limit her usage of these teaching strategies because they acted on these opportunities in ways that prohibited her from teaching academic content. Her metaphor of "pull[ing] them back in" reflects a power struggle with male students, and she had to be careful about when she released some control because they could quickly make it difficult for her to continue teaching. Ultimately this meant that she limited the opportunities for all students to



engage in fun or creative learning opportunities because she could not trust the predominantly male group to participate in class in productive ways.

Kelly and Laura described and responded to students in their “girl” and “boy” classes in ways that make it difficult to imagine the presence of a student who challenges or disrupts heteronormative assumptions about “normal” behavior for adolescent students. Neither teacher acknowledged the presence or possibility of gender expressions that would challenge the social patterns in their classes. Further, neither teacher proposed pedagogical possibilities for destabilizing the gender roles their students take on in the classroom. This absence raises questions about the possibilities for students who do not conform to these gender roles to “be themselves,” “comfortable,” safe, and included in these classroom spaces.

### **Who Gets to Speak?**

Gender hierarchies and gender roles were reproduced through seemingly innocuous classroom practices. Although most participants at least mentioned the problem of managing boys’ behavior or minimizing interruptions from boys, it typically was not presented as an issue of inequality or as a pattern that could result in an exclusionary environment for students—boys or girls—who did not engage in such expressions of masculine privilege. However, two teachers raised the issue of gender hierarchies in school contexts in relation to some of their girls’ classroom performances. Molly spoke about the challenge of encouraging participation from all students in class discussion and had classroom policies in place that required vocal participation from all students in her Advanced Placement classes. However, she expressed concern that this was not enough to alleviate the lack of confidence she believed was preventing her girls from speaking beyond the minimum requirement. This pattern was visible during observed Advanced Placement seminar discussions:

A girl with long blonde hair, right in my eye line, looked pale and nervous. Throughout class I'd seen her skimming pages in the textbook, and I had the impression she was searching for something to contribute to the discussion. She hadn't participated yet and kept checking her watch, possibly to see how much time she had left to participate. She put her hand up when there were 5 minutes left and contributed an idea about child labor. (field notes, 1/26/12)

During an interview, Molly cited the example of this student and others in the same class who often exhibited visible anxiety about speaking during seminar. She said these were students who produced excellent written work but who did not publically share their ideas in the classroom. She acknowledged the challenges experienced by shy, quiet kids, and she experienced tension between pushing girls to speak and honoring the other ways they express their knowledge:

But at the same time, particularly with girls, I don't want girls to let other people speak for them all the time...And I think girls do it more than boys. You know, it's just that wait, and hopefully somebody else will answer. (Interview 2, 5/11/12)

Molly described a classroom dynamic where girls were positioned as subordinate to boys. In the context of Advanced Placement U.S. history, this meant girls were hesitant and nervous about speaking during class, so boys' opinions and interpretations of curriculum set the agenda for their seminar discussions. Molly's interpretation of this dynamic was that girls' default classroom performance was to "let" boys overpower them or speak for them, which implied that they could make the choice to be more active during seminar discussion. However, she also referenced a familiar narrative about girls' achievement in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary education: "In spite of the changes in women's roles in society...many of today's girls fall into traditional patterns of low self-image, self-doubt, and self-censorship of their creative

and intellectual potential” (Orenstien, 1994, p. xx). This was a pattern that Molly found troubling, and one that she did not believe she had successfully disrupted.

Laura also struggled to understand and disrupt patterns of feminine insecurity in her science classes. When talking to Laura after an observation she shared some of her frustrations about girls’ classroom performance in recent days:

“Oh, you should have been here yesterday!” and told me that a lot of girls in the class I just observed were acting helpless and like they didn’t understand the lab assignment, but she knows they get it. She said girls don’t want to show that they’re smart because smart girls don’t get boyfriends. They were acting helpless in class, and then a number of them stayed after to ask her to help them complete the lab report. Laura seemed really frustrated with this. (field notes, 2/1/12)

Laura described a day when girls’ classroom speech focused on expressions of helplessness and insecurity. This type of speech was not understood to be productive, nor was it representative of girls’ actual knowledge or capabilities. Laura interpreted this behavior as part of girls’ strategies for participating in the heterosexual dating scene, which she perceived to require girls to minimize their own intelligence and capabilities to attract boys’ desire. This interpretation of her students’ behavior put the blame on girls for underperformance and implied that it was up to girls to stop performing helplessness and take pride in their intelligence. Therefore, she understood this problem in terms of individual girls’ choices about how they want to position themselves in relation to potential dating partners. She did not, however, trouble how hierarchical gender relations and heteronormative gender norms produce social pressure to follow gender rules that claim girls must be subordinate to boys in order to be desirable or to be a “good” woman.

Instead, she presented this as the “natural order of things,” and as a teacher she was limited in her capacity to fight the “nature” of adolescent social life.

Girls often had difficulty getting a word in edgewise during class. Boys talked more, moved around the classroom more, and interrupted the teacher with questions or comments much more often than girls. Further, girls’ subordinate position in the classroom was apparent throughout the data. Much like the teachers, my attention was drawn to boys’ noise and movement, which meant that girls’ behavior was not recorded in observation data as frequently or in as much detail as boys’. Girls did not volunteer as often, and teachers had to either call on girls or shush boys so that girls could be heard when they did seek opportunities to be speak during class activities.

Kelly quickly listed the multiple-choice answers. One of the boys at the front, center table made a grunting noise after every answer. After the third grunt she said “stop” in a low, dry tone and students laughed softly. Kelly: “We skipped number 18 ‘cause I didn’t like it.” Male student: “fair enough.” Boys at front center table talkative through this whole process of checking their practice test answers. Kelly: “Raise your hand if you got 100.” No students raise their hands. “Are there any you’d like to go over?” A girl with long blonde hair raised her hand. *[OC: I haven’t heard her speak yet. I did see her working with the boy next to her on the practice questions.]* Students were talking to one another and Kelly interrupted them. “Megan has a question, so we’re going to go over it.” (field notes, 12/1/11)

This scene is representative of routine activities and social dynamics in Kelly’s classroom. Kelly periodically gave students questions from past years’ state exams to help them practice or review, and once students completed the questions she always spent time discussing the correct

answers. Male students were typically vocal during this process—cheering when their answers were correct, groaning when they were wrong, or arguing when they believed Kelly was giving them the wrong answers. Girls listened quietly, marked the correct answers on their papers, and occasionally asked a clarification question as Megan did in this example. In order for her question to be heard, Kelly had to exercise her “referee” role to create space for a girls’ voice. Throughout the observation data, such interruptions had been normalized to the extent that they are hardly noticed by teachers or students, and at no time did boys experience any real consequences for these interruptions.

Daily classroom routines indicated that teachers consciously tried to minimize the extent to which boys “took over” class, but their strategies did not indicate recognition of these behaviors as expressions of male privilege. Boys did not experience significant consequences, and they were not asked to be aware of how they were silencing their peers. At times teachers told their students things like “I know it’s the boys” (Megan, field notes, 5/15/12) when talking to them about behavioral issues, but male students did not respond to these messages in ways that indicated they understood that their vocal dominance was a *problem*. Other teachers tried to find positive outlets for boys’ voices and energy, like choosing them to get up from their seats and write their homework answers on the white or chalkboard (Karen, field notes, 12/6/11). Often when boys created distracting noise during instruction, teachers made rapid transitions between management and the content of their lesson to minimize the amount of time they spent correcting the boys. For example, Laura’s routine for answering students’ questions about homework included switching quickly between completing practice problems on the chalkboard and managing disruptions from male students.

Laura continued answer to students' questions and go over problems she thought might be giving them trouble (standing at chalkboard and writing out calculations). In the middle of one problem, two boys in the back row were talking to one another. Laura stopped explaining a calculation and said, "What's your question?" and they boys shook their heads and stopped talking. Female student 1 (F1) asked another question about the problem Laura interrupted to addressed the boys. F1 said: "I'm just confused because..." and Laura returned to the problem to address her question. *[OC: The female student barely paid attention to the talking boys behind her. She continued talking to Laura about her question as if the interruption never happened.]* (field notes, 1/20/12)

In this episode, Laura paused in the middle of explaining a difficult problem to ask two boys to stop talking, and the girl who had asked for help with the problem continued asking questions without visibly acknowledging that her time getting help from the teacher had been interrupted. Her question after Laura paused to talk to the boys served was the purpose of keeping the teacher's attention and get an answer to her question. Further, her effort for regaining Laura's attention did not draw attention to the fact that she was interrupted. Confronting the boys about their interruption would create conflict and possibly social backlash for questioning their entitlement to speak any time they wish. The girl who asked a question in Kelly's class was similarly non-confrontational because she waited patiently for Kelly to call on her, and then was dependent on the teacher to quiet the boys before her question could be heard. Both episodes illustrate how girls are put in positions where they may need to be perseverant *and* non-confrontational to get answers to their questions because interruptions from male students were always possible.

**“The Boy Club”: Unchallenged Male Privilege**

Despite participants' success in eliminating overt sexist and homophobic targeting from their classrooms, issues of male privilege were still pervasive because boys' bids for control and attention were routine elements in classroom life. Boys flirted with and invaded the personal space of female classmates and teachers, asked their female teachers personal questions, shouted at teachers to get their attention, and engaged in "boy club" banter that included sexist joking and policing one another's masculinity. These actions were often loud and on display for the entire classroom community to observe. Teachers' attempts to intervene or "control" these behaviors were generally limited to the episodes that interrupted their lesson plans or were interpreted as overtly insulting or disrespectful. On many occasions teachers ignored these behaviors or used humor to deflect the boys' attention back to their academic work, and the "boy club" dynamics were understood to be relatively harmless. When talking in second interview about the behavior and atmosphere in the classes that had been observed for the study, and Paula described a class of eleventh graders as the "boy club":

There's a lot more of the boy club like we're going to mess around with each other. We're going to move the desk around before the period starts, whatever. Just stupid stuff. I'm going to make a comment and that guy is going to make a comment about that guy's comment. (Interview 2, 3/15/12)

The "boy club" behavior described here was behavior that interrupted Paula's teaching and the learning or concentration of other students, but it was also behavior that was understood to be "normal" for adolescent boys: physically acting upon and manipulating their environment, "messing around" and joking with one another during class. Her use of the words "whatever" and "just stupid stuff" indicates that she did not take their behavior all that seriously, and she did not interpret the behavior as personally disrespectful or harmful to her or to the other students in

the class. However, these verbal and physical masculine performances overshadowed the needs—or even the existence—of other students in the classroom. Their voices were literally heard over other students, their movements in the classroom were larger and more frequent than other students', and these patterns reproduced the power associated with the hegemonic (White) male body in classroom spaces. "Boy club" behavior was most often observed as students were entering and exiting the classroom, and these examples highlight the physical movement of male students who, rather than come into the room and sit in their seats, frequently used passing period to joke with friends, change the configuration of the room in some way, or ask Paula for a favor or special privilege:

M1: "Do we get new seats?" P: "No." M1: "Why not?" P: "'Cause I was too busy re-grading all your essays." M1: "I'd rather have new seats." M2: "I think we should pick our own seats." P: "I think that is a terrible idea." M3: "Can I jump over this chair, and the desk where I land is my new seat?" P: "No! Sit down." (The room was filling with students during this exchange.) As the room filled with students, Paula walked around passing back papers. She said to M4, "Brent, why are you following me around?" M4: "'Cause I'm trying to figure out what went down on Friday." (field notes, 1/23/12)

During the passing period, Paula told a [White] male student to take home his hockey jersey (he'd left it in her room) because she was tired of it "stinking up my classroom." The boy took it off the cabinet and walked around the room with it. I heard him say he was looking for a place to hang it up. He walked around the perimeter, including the space behind the teachers' desks [*OC: space in the back of the classroom typically off-limits for students*], and ended up hanging it on a hook above the white board in front of



the room—just to the left of the Smart Board screen. Paula gave him a “teacher look” when he did it, but she didn’t take it down or ask him to. It stayed there the entire period. (Field notes 2/18/12).

Physical movement and verbal bids for teacher attention were two of the most common behavioral patterns that reproduced male privilege in the observed classroom contexts. In each of these episodes, White male students moved and spoke in ways that made it all but impossible for the teacher to focus her attention on other students or tasks. In the first, male students presented questions and requests that asked the teacher to cater to their preferences. These requests were coupled with physical movement (threats to jump over desks, following her around the room) that further demanded teacher attention and response. In the second episode, the boy’s response to a request to take his jersey home was to re-position the jersey in the most visible place he could find in the classroom. This action served as a bid for teacher and classmates to pay attention to his movement around the entire perimeter of the classroom and to his status as an athlete, and the position of the jersey meant that everyone in the room literally looked at his status symbol for the duration of the class. Paula’s facial expression communicated that she did not approve of the student’s behavior, but she did not challenge the students’ movement or the display of his jersey.

In both episodes, Paula’s responses to masculine behavior allowed their movement or bids for attention to continue and their male privilege to circulate. In the first example she jokingly resisted the boys’ requests and reprimanded them for their physical movement, but she did not ask the boys to change how they addressed her or moved around the room in the minutes before class started. In the second she expressed her disapproval non-verbally, but she did not stop the display of masculine athleticism or overt disobedience during her class. Thus, the logic

of white male privilege was not challenged in these episodes: male students reproduced systems of entitlement that allow men to be verbally and physically dominant. The teacher's non-confrontational strategies for deflecting or defusing masculine behavior sidestepped the possibility of becoming involved in power struggles with these boys who are understood to be behaving like "normal" adolescent males. The taken-for-granted, unproblematic "truth" that boys are louder and more physical remained unchallenged.

When teachers talked about the "boy club" or "boy problem," descriptions of these hypermasculine or male-dominated classroom dynamics were simultaneously presented as sources of daily problems in their professional lives and as examples of normal, unproblematic social dynamics in a middle or high school classroom. Teachers' narratives about these gender dynamics and their efforts to navigate them—and keep their students focused on academics—provide the important insight that, although all participants claimed to be committed to the safety and comfort of LGBTQ students, they did not address a fundamental component of LGBTQ marginalization: heterosexual male privilege. Behavior patterns that emulated masculine authority or power frequently interrupted lesson plans, and teachers responded to these behavior patterns by adapting their pedagogy with the intent to place enough limitations on the boys' physical movement and bids for attention to cover the necessary academic content. That is, rather than try to completely stop these behaviors or raise the boys' awareness of their own social privilege, the teachers negotiated with the boys, used humor to disarm and deflect them, reminded them of classroom rules over and over, and ignored behaviors that were not deemed to be sufficiently "bad" or disruptive.

Kelly described the negotiation of male privilege as being a "referee"—a metaphor that implied her role was largely to enforce rules. Kelly's strategy for managing and regulating these

behaviors was to move eight boys to seats in the front row of the classroom. She claimed that she had moved them there because when they were scattered around the room they would talk louder to get her attention. She said after an observation in this class, “If they want my attention, I guess I’ll put them close to me” (field notes, 12/1/11). These students in the front row often made bids for Kelly’s attention, both to ask questions about their academic work and to engage her in conversations about her personal life. For example, on a day when students spent class time working on review worksheets for an upcoming test, and Kelly was walking around the room and responding to students who raised their hands to ask for help, her attention was repeatedly pulled to the same group of boys in the front row:

Boys at front center table addressed Kelly. “Ms. R? Any grand plans for this weekend?”

K: “Um, one of my best friends is coming to town.” Student: “You have friends?” K: “I know, right? A friend from college.” (field notes, 12/1/11)

Students at front center table asked more questions about the test review, and she guided them to the correct answer in the textbook. When they figured out the answer she said, “Look at your scientific knowledge!” It sounded like they were also asking questions about her fiancée. They asked for his first and middle name—but it was hard to hear any other details.” (field notes, 12/1/11)

As she walked back to the front of the room, boys at front center table still wanted to know about her Christmas presents and stopped her to ask about it. I couldn’t hear exactly what the boys said to her, but she said, “A Pandora bracelet. The ones with the

charms.” And: “He knows.” [*OC: I concluded that they asked if her fiancée knew what she wanted for Christmas.*] (field notes, 12/1/11).

These episodes are examples of interactions where male students sought Kelly’s attention in ways that were (a) louder and more visible than other students in the class; and (b) testing the boundaries of teachers/student relationships. Other students in this class raised their hands and waited for Kelly to come to their table, which reflected their adherence to traditional professional boundaries and traditional navigations of teacher authority. In contrast, these boys repeatedly called her name and interrupted her when she was talking to other students and, once they had her attention, they stretched conversations beyond academic matters and asked Kelly questions about her weekend plans and personal relationships. These are questions one might ask a friend and, therefore, which indicated an attempt to elevate their status from “student” to “adult” or “peer.” Kelly’s responses contained implicit permission to engage her in these kinds of conversations.

Another way that boys performed male privilege and pushed the boundaries of their teacher/student relationship was to find ways to interject more direct, sexualized comments into classroom conversation:

Ms. R., are you going to Bonefish Grill to get some Wednesday night Bang Bang Shrimp?” K: “I’m not. I don’t really like spicy.” M1: “I’m going. I like Bang Bang.” Some other boys sitting nearby laughed. K did not respond. Directed her attention to another student. (field notes, 2/29/12)

This interaction occurred in a context where students should have been completing an assignment and Kelly was calling students up to her desk to talk about their grades and check their work. This student had been talking to peers around him rather than working and then

initiated this interaction with Kelly. Nothing else was happening in the classroom that would connect to a question about evening plans or going to a restaurant, so the student's spontaneous question served no other purpose than to create an opportunity to use the words "bang" and "bone"—colloquial for sex—in a conversation with a teacher. This interaction was a successful hetero-masculine performance because the student earned positive recognition from his peers (laughter) in return for the risk incorporating sexualized slang into a conversation with a teacher. Kelly did not challenge his statement (or even ask him to get back to work), but her opportunities to do so were limited because the student had maintained deniability: if she had accused him of being inappropriate, he could have flipped the power dynamic and accused *her* of sexualized interpretations when he was talking about the actual name of an appetizer at a nearby restaurant.

Pascoe (2013) argues that boys are engaged in a "complicated daily ordeal in which they continually strive to avoid being subject to gay epithets, but are constantly vulnerable to them" and that "these interactive practices maybe be as tied to structural inequalities, and gendered and sexualized meaning-making processes as they are to individual-level variables" (91). So, while their performances of privilege or entitlement are expressions of dominance over women or men whose masculinity has "failed" in some way, it is also a strategy to prove one's own successful masculinity and avoid being labeled as *fag*. In the above example, the student earned positive feedback from male peers for using sexualized language in a conversation with their young female teacher, and he successfully continued the circulation of hetero-masculinity as a powerful force in the classroom. If he had tripped over the joke or if she had successfully reprimanded him, he would have been open to ridicule from his peers and Kelly would have briefly disrupted this circulation of masculinity. More frequently, these battles of masculine status occurred in the context of boys teasing one another. A notable example occurred in one of Laura's classes, when

a group of male athletes participated in an episode of sexualized teasing. One day the kids were completing a lab that included pumping plastic bottles full of air using a foot-operated bicycle pump and measuring the air pressure inside the bottle. Laura asked a boy who was sitting in the front row to stand up and help her fill the bottles:

“Brad, why don’t you help me.” The boys in the class responded by saying things like: “Brad!”; “Step up to the plate, Brad!”; and “Work it, Brad.” M1 and M3 applauded softly when Brad walked from his desk toward Laura. Laura responded: “I only picked him because he’s in the front.” She hooked the bottle to the bicycle pump using a black tube and placed the bottle on the floor next to the bicycle pump. Brad used the foot pump to put air in the bottle, which caused him to raise his knee up and down to operate the pump. While he filled more bottles, Laura showed the class how the air made a full bottle firm and the syringe inside the bottle was compressed because of the increased air pressure. She demonstrated how to measure air pressure and let out air to release the pressure. Then she demonstrated how to calculate pressure and volume.

Laura referred the students to the data table on their handout. She told them to only complete the first 2 columns. They will only be doing one trial because the air pumps aren’t working correctly. She told them to get into groups of 4. The kids moved towards the back of the classroom to get safety goggles. A few went toward the front where Laura was standing and where Brad was still using the pump to fill bottles with air. and the bicycle pump to start filling their group’s plastic bottle. M3 shouted over the din in the room: “Yeah, Brad. Look at that form. Don’t forget to get your hips in there.” (field notes, 3/1/12)

Being helpful is a feminized quality, so when Brad was chosen to assist the teacher he immediately became vulnerable to the possibility of gender policing from male peers. The other boys seized that opportunity without hesitation. He could have been exonerated by the fact that operating the bicycle pump required at least a minimum amount of strength, balance, and physical coordination, but in this context the task opened him up to teasing about his “form.” Further, his classmates’ calls to “work it” and “get your hips in there” cited the possibility of moving his body in ways that were overtly sexual. With the exception of saying she only chose Brad because he was sitting nearby, Laura did not comment or intervene when boys teased Brad about “stepping up to the plate” or his “form” while operating the bicycle pump. Without teacher intervention, the boys had free reign to reinforce social norms for successful masculinity by regulating the movements of their peer who had been chosen to stand in the front of the classroom. Further, Brad’s position at the front of the classroom and the volume of the boys’ voices meant that every person in the classroom was able to hear and see these episodes. Through this interaction, the boys who engaged in teasing Brad separated themselves from the possibility of being targeted themselves because they were increasing their own social status by criticizing someone else’s masculinity. Laura’s failure to intervene implied that she did not interpret these interactions to carry any injurious effects—it was just another example of boys being boys. However, the injurious effects of such interactions circulated by reinforcing the strict, impossibly narrow possibilities for successful masculine gender expression, and by establishing the classroom as a space for boys to express masculine dominance.

### **Limited Gender Possibilities**

All participants claimed that they intended for their classrooms to be safe and comfortable for LGBTQ youth. However, after observing class after class where all students

were assumed to reasonably conform to the heteronormative gender expectations and where these gender norms manifested in ways that allowed boys to dominate classroom dynamics, questions began to rise about what would happen if a recognizably gender non-conforming student was a member of one of these classes. How would it be possible for these classroom environments to live up to the teachers' promises of comfort and safety? While it was never assumed that all students in these classrooms identified as heterosexual or gender conforming (in some classes it was known to the researcher that gay or lesbian students were present), it is worth noting that not a single student in an observed class performed her or his gender in a way that visibly transgressed binary gender norms.

Teachers' knowledge of these possibilities was also limited. A few participants had anecdotes about boys they had seen wearing nail polish or make up, and Rachel knew lesbian students who had worn tuxedos to prom instead of dresses. Kelly told a story about feeling surprised when two male friends held hands during class, and Kelly had biologically male cousin in elementary school who had shown signs of feminine gender identity. These were the only acknowledgements of the possibility that student identities could fall outside the "boy" and "girl" categories. Mayo (2014) argues that such "gender play" potentially suggests "to adults that there are more possible identities for students to inhabit than adults might consider normal or even possible" (p. 38). In this research context, isolated examples of students' gender play raised teacher awareness of a broader range of identities that will potentially need to be integrated into classroom life, but this awareness did not result in reflections about why student identities that transgress binary gender categories are so "different," unwelcome, or unsafe in the first place. In other words, teachers could conceptualize the task of meeting students' immediate individual needs for classrooms where they will not be harassed or judged, but they did not question what



they “know” about gender or reflect on the various ways that their classroom dynamics reinforce traditional gender norms and limit the possibilities for gender play to occur in their classrooms.

### **Bitch, Mother, Lesbian: Teachers’ Gender Roles**

Just as students’ possibilities for socially acceptable gender expressions are regulated by heteronormative expectations, teachers’ professional identities intersect with gender norms in ways that limit the possibilities for how participants could lead their classes and relate to their students and still be recognizable as competent professionals. Gender norms for educators have shifted since the mid-Nineteenth Century, and Blount (1996, 2000) argues that cultural shifts after World War II contributed to strict gender polarization of educators’ professional possibilities. Schools were encouraged to hire married women teachers so they could nurture children and serve as role models for family life (1996), but women who pursued school administration were perceived as “masculine, aggressive, ambitious, and inappropriate” (p. 331). Married women who displayed these “masculine” qualities were less likely to face ridicule because “marriage was regarded as proof of heterosexuality, an important facet of appropriately feminine character” (p. 332). Although single teachers were preferred prior to World War I, increasing cultural emphasis on family and marriage as symbols of a moral life by the mid-Twentieth Century meant that “single women were increasingly viewed as standing outside their conventional gender roles” (Blount, 2000, p. 89), possibly deviant (lesbian), and unsuitable for working with children. Blount argues that the imposition of strict gender roles on education is “due not only to deep-rooted sexism, but also in part to a generalized fear of homosexuality, which...has become linked in many minds with cross gender-tendencies” (2000, p. 97).

As teacher allies integrate support for LGBTQ students into their professional identities and practice, they also must navigate gendered professional expectations. Participants used

gendered vocabulary such as *mother*, *nurturing*, and *protective* to describe their roles in the classroom and to situate their support for LGBTQ students into the broader context of professional responsibility. Additionally, the boundaries for “appropriate” relationships between students and teachers were shaped by heteronormative definitions of acceptable or innocent adult/child relationships, and teachers navigated these relationships differently according to their age, marital status, years of professional experience, and the gender of the student involved in the interaction. Finally, participants also reflected on the risk of gender transgressions and the work of maintaining professional status if their gender performances tested the boundaries of binary gender categories. Their experiences of navigating the intersections of gender and teacher identity serve as another illustration of how heteronormative gender expectations are used to exclude LGBTQ identities from school life and to categorize *all* members of the school community into rigid binary gender categories.

### **Safe Classrooms and Motherly Teachers**

Teachers incorporated ally work into the institutionally sanctioned roles and responsibilities that were already available to them, and several participants cited motherhood as a broad framework for explaining the safe spaces they have created or to explain why they think LGBTQ students feel safe in their classrooms. Educators are expected to abide by the “unwritten rule that teachers should not appear to be sexualized people” (Epstein & Johnson, 1998, p. 115), and they are often able to meet this cultural standard if their lives conform to heteronormative expectations of marriage and family. The de-sexualized identities of “wife” and “mother” easily align with cultural expectations that “good” teachers will be kind, caring, nurturing, and patient (Alsup, 2006; Boler, 1999; Britzman, 1991). “Safe space” and other safe schools programs reflect this expectation that teachers will care for and protect their students, and this approach to

creating a supportive school environment implies a need to attend to students' social and emotional needs just as much as their academic needs. For instance, Kelly claimed that she needed to be a "den mother" specifically for groups of students whose lives outside of school make it difficult for them to be academically successful. She performed this role through her attention to students' need for "extreme" positive reactions to success, careful attention to their academic progress to make sure they are not getting discouraged, interest in their personal lives, and concern for their overall well-being. Rachel also used the vocabulary of *mothering* to describe how her care for students extended beyond academics:

Um, I think I'm incredibly patient. I, I think that one of the things that has made me successful, um, in this environment is I, I have a huge sense of humor and I play off of that and I allow kids to play off of that. Um, I also, I set limits and I feel like I'm pretty clear about the limits, which I think a lot of kids look for structure, especially when they don't have structured home lives. Um, and you know, so I play off a little bit of all of those things. Um, I'm very motherly. I have a two-year-old and four-year-old. So I think the minute that I knew I was pregnant with my four-year-old I became more motherly.  
(Interview 1, 4/3/12)

Rachel's description of her professional identity reflects the idealized cultural image of the *caring teacher*. She structured her classroom environment around patience, humor, and clear classroom rules that imitated standards for a nurturing home life, and she compared her care for students to the care she feels for her own children. These elements worked together to create an environment where students knew her expectations of them, but it was also known that she would be patient enough to give them opportunities to correct their mistakes or be willing to laugh with them rather than take mistakes too seriously. Further, describing herself as

“motherly” implied unconditional love and concern for students’ well-being and suggested she intended to be a stable, consistent, and trustworthy figure in her students’ lives.

Megan directly connected her identity as a mother to her professional identity and her commitment to supporting LGBTQ students. In the email she wrote to volunteer for the study, she presented her experiences as both parent and teacher: “I am the parent of a gay child and I have had many students over the years who were LGBTQ and afraid to discuss it with most people.” Her experiences of supporting LGBTQ students who were afraid to discuss their gender or sexual identities included caring for students whose families were not supportive of them:

His family disowned him. To this day, they don’t...he left here after he graduated from high school and went and lived with his paternal grandmother in Detroit who called me and said to me, his father was really nasty to me and, uh, because I was very supportive of him, and [the grandmother] apologized to me for her son, his father. (Interview 1, 3/18/12)

Although this story does not specifically mention mothering, it is an example of using care to fill a void in a student’s life, and it illustrates how Megan’s participation in the life of a student could cross from school life into family life. Part of knowing and supporting this student was coming to know his family experiences and, eventually, connect with family members who were also part of his support network. She did not set boundaries on her care for this student, and she expressed support for him regardless of the risk that she would experience conflict with his father. At the end of the study, when she was asked to reflect on why this student and others feel safe talking to her about LGBTQ identity or other things that they do not typically share with

adults, she speculated that safety and her motherly approach to teaching were relevant to earning her students' trust:

[T]he thing is, in the classroom, I've, I'm kind of, I can be motherly and bitchy and all of the things rolled up into one, but they always feel safe. You know? And I don't know if it's that motherly part or what it is....Um, you know, perhaps it's because, you know, I don't lie to them about anything. You know? I tell them the truth. (Interview 2, 6/19/12).

Megan describes herself as both “motherly” and “bitchy,” which are oppositional professional identity claims. “Bitchy” is gender transgressive because it resists the social expectations that a woman will always be nice, compliant, or patient. The identity claim also carries a negative connotation because “bitch” is a marker for a woman who has overstepped the boundaries of femininity. Megan is a teacher with a loud voice, a sarcastic sense of humor, exhibited little patience for students who did not follow her instructions, and she told stories of confronting school and district administrators to fight against policies that she believed were irrational or had negative effects on her students. However, because she was also “motherly,” she believed the classroom remained a safe environment. When the images of mother and teacher are connected, educational discourse is applying the most idealized motherly characteristics to the work of educating young people. The mother is assumed to be trustworthy, kind, forgiving, invested in creating environments where youth can learn and thrive. Being motherly is believed to have a more powerful effect on the students and the classroom environment than being “bitchy” because feeling cared for is the most important part of the classroom experience. Additionally, it is possible that her bitchy qualities communicate the message to her students that she will fight for them when they need an advocate.

Participants who talked about being motherly were all committed to caring for students and making them feel safe. The teachers were committed to being stable and loving fixtures in their students' lives, and they wanted students to be able to trust and rely on them. This type of teaching philosophy attends to the social and emotional needs of their students and to the quality of the classroom climate, and these priorities were understood to be imperative for supporting the success of LGBTQ youth because teachers are responsible for minimizing the effects of victimization or preventing it altogether. However, care frameworks for working with socially marginalized students often inadvertently privilege teacher perspectives. In their research on White teachers' care for students of color, Pennington, Brock, and Ndura (2012) argue that socially privileged teachers "can be focused tightly on themselves as the ones caring acting in socially determined ways. Teachers' positions afford them the power to construct caring relationships in ways they deem appropriate" (p. 767). In other words, because teachers are in positions of both social privilege and institutional authority, there is a risk that they will make decisions about how to meet students' needs without necessarily giving marginalized youth opportunities to articulate their experiences or the kinds of care they need. Additionally, care frameworks individualize issues of marginalization—focusing on helping individuals be more successful and feel safer at school, but not "addressing the multiple ways school cultures subtly yet systematically silence and exclude LGBTQ students" (Smith, in press). In other words, "framing ally work through the discourse of the *caring teacher* risks the pitfalls of deficit-based teaching practices" (Smith, in press) where the focus is on "fixing" or "saving" marginalized students rather than looking to the culture that marginalizes them.

### **Gender and Authority**

Another way that participants' gender and professional identities intersected was in discussions of teacher authority. Teachers perceived their possibilities for authority to be shaped by both their own gender and the gender of the students they were working with in a particular situation. This was a topic where gender stereotyping was particularly prevalent because assumptions about men as natural leaders and women as caretakers—but not necessarily automatic authority figures—were embedded in how participants felt about their own authority in the classroom and how they compared themselves to colleagues. Karen described a specific experience where she observed the stark differences between the possibilities for her authority and those of a male colleague.

[S]o the 8th period class that you've seen many times, um, the period started one day and I was filling out forms. I was at the front of the room...and there was a little bit of chaos because the class hadn't really started and they were all kinda talking and I was signing these forms. And the, the chemistry teacher came in the room for something, and a boy in the back row got up to go to the bathroom. And he looked, and the chemistry teacher saw him as he walked in the door, and the boy looked at the teacher and the teacher just gestured, pointed his finger down. And the kid looked at him and he just sat right down. You know? Like, they would never do that for me. You know? 'Cause I'm not scary.

But, um, yeah, and they have this, they command somehow more respect in some ways. Unless you are a really mean teacher. You know, and there are some women teachers that are really mean, and kids are scared of them. But, those are really old school teachers, too. I think. There's like no young ones that are like really mean, you know? (Interview 3, 6/21/12)

Throughout the study, Karen repeatedly expressed a wish that teaching this group of students would be a little easier for her in terms of following directions and listening rather than all talking at once, and she presented this experience as an example of the authority she never manages to have with her students. On this particular day, a male teacher walked into Karen's classroom and immediately took over with his form of authority, which overshadowed Karen's role in her own classroom. When the student stood up from his seat, the male teacher responded with a swift directive rather than allowing Karen's rules and leadership stand as the standards students should look to when they are in her class. Karen was not bothered by the teacher's interjection, but rather in awe of his ability to get such a swift response from students who she knew well and who had challenged her authority for the entire school year. She perceived that male teachers "command more respect"—a phrase that is indicative of cultural assumptions about men's automatic or "natural" claim to leadership. In order for women to do this, they have to prove their authority by being "really mean." In other words, women have to move away from traditionally feminine teaching qualities—like being patient, kind, or nurturing—to command the same respect as their male colleagues.

Younger teachers talked about issues of authority more often than other participants because they were in the midst of developing an authoritative persona and learning to be a leader in the classroom. Kelly was in her second year of teaching, and after a "rough" first year she believed she had learned both to establish herself as a leader and develop rapport with her students. However, some students resisted her, and her ability to productively work with those students was connected to the gendered position of both herself and the student. When asked about a student who had challenged her that year, Kelly provided an example of a student who represented a "type" of girl that made Kelly uncomfortable:



She, she is, she hates school. She just wants to do whatever she wants to do whenever she wants to do it. Doesn't want to have to listen to authority. Doesn't, doesn't want to do any of it. You know, doesn't want to be here and she will point blank tell you that. You know? She tries to be nice about it. She's like, "It's not you, I just hate school in general." I'm like, "Okay, super. Way to be open and receptive to some new things." Um, so she's been really tough for me because I think part of it is that, that is the type of person, that when I was her age I would have been very intimidated by. Like, as a 15-year-old I didn't know how to relate to her then. You know, and I don't know that that much has changed in the last, you know, 12 years. I think that is tough for me. In general I think I do, I do well with female students who are like me and guys in general I have an easier time with. Like, regardless of their personality. I have an easier time with guys. I think that's for me in general in my real life too. So she, she's been tough and I never really know who I'm going to get from her when she comes in the door. (Interview 3, 6/11/12)

Kelly's attempts to teach and develop a relationship with this student illustrate how power struggles that are similar to those found in peer groups can also occur between students and teachers. Kelly compared this student to girls who intimidated her in high school. In this context, "intimidating" is defined as a girl who resists interactions with others by flatly refusing to engage with them rather than being "nice" and politely engaging in the social rituals of the classroom. This student was dismissive of Kelly's authority as her teacher and of the possibility that she could have a positive experience by participating in the class. Her attitude about school and failure to be "open and receptive" did not conform to gendered expectations for "good" girls or students because she was not compliant, hard working, or interested in trying to please her

teacher. Her perspectives on school were oppositional to Kelly's worldview and her own gender performance, which made it difficult for Kelly to imagine how she could convince this student to become more open to the possible value of school. Ultimately, although Kelly holds the default authority position in her classroom, this student's resisted her authority in ways that reminded Kelly of high school experiences when she felt intimidated by—and, therefore, subordinate to—particular “types” of girls. She did not directly claim that she felt intimidated by this student, but connecting her narrative to those high school experiences implies that this student is threatening her authoritative stance in some way. Girls who conform more closely to the “good girl” role and “boys in general” do not resist her in a way that makes her feel like she is fighting to hold on to her authority in the classroom.

Paula was the participant who spoke the most about issues of teacher authority. Paula felt that she had to consistently battle to resist male students' challenges to her authority. She was a well-liked teacher, and she talked many times about using her rapport with students “to my advantage” because she perceived that students' genuine affection for her motivated them to work harder and behave in her classes. However, she also believed her age and small physical stature contributed to boys' persistence in engaging her in joking, teasing and banter, and she said they used these social strategies to try to push her out of her professional role and into the “friend zone.” She said, “I had a hard first year,” and that she became “exhausted” from trying to manage, deflect, and minimize her male students' behavior. She said that at the present point in her career—the research year was her fifth year of teaching—she was much more comfortable navigating and managing this behavior from her male students:

Yeah, I definitely think that...[being] only a few years apart from these guys, and you know, it's, it's the age. The, they're, they're just like that, and there's nothing...you don't

wanna hurt their feelings by ignoring them or staying away from them, but you also don't want to become closer than you have to, to give them the wrong idea about anything.

'Cause I think that they don't look at you as an authority figure when you're the age I am. I think you're either, they're your friend or they don't get along with you, so they just do whatever. I just, I don't feel...I don't know. Sometimes I feel authoritative, but not sometimes with the boys. I feel like they just...shrug it off and are like, "Oh, well, who are you?" [laughs] And that kind of thing with the boys. But I'm getting, obviously, more and more into that role as I go into it. 'Cause I've learned, you know? You can't just mess, you can't just kid around with them as much as you can, you know, with maybe the girls and things like that. (Interview 3, 6/18/12)

Epstein and Johnson (1998) argue that "schools...are structured on age relations" (p. 113) and that teachers and students have different interests shaping how they engage in these age relations: "[I]n teacher cultures, issues of surveillance and control are often overriding. Pupil cultures, on the other hand, often hinge upon the blocking and undermining of teachers' disciplinary powers" (p. 113). In Paula's reflections on the lessons she has learned about authority, she indicated that the core issue in her social interactions with boys has been control. Boys act on their male privilege through their attempts to "mess around" or "kid around" with her—which is what one does with friends—and she wanted to limit those types of conversations to avoid falling into a trap where they think of her as a friend and do not respect her as a teacher. She alluded to social dynamics where heterosexual boys seek and feel entitled to attention from girls ("don't wanna hurt their feelings"), but this was not problematic for her. She dismissed such displays of male privilege, saying "they're just like that" and that she tried to navigate those social dynamics in ways that will not offend them. However, she also acknowledged that there is greater risk to

authority and professionalism when a young female teacher has a friendly relationship with heterosexual boys than there is when she is friendly with girls.

During her last interview, Paula provided examples of how being young and friendly with her students had been both a positive and negative during that particular school year, and she raised the question of whether or not she can trust her students to interpret their relationships with her in the same way she would. To illustrate this perspective she contrasted a positive relationship with a group of female students and a relationship with a male student that made her feel uneasy. Throughout the school year she had worked with a group of girls who often spent their lunch periods with her, and they formed a relationship that she compared to a relationship between sisters:

So that made me feel nice, and I knew that they worked extra hard because they really enjoyed our relationship and stuff like that. It felt comfortable. But then, I guess I would say on a negative one that I have to be careful with is, um, you know, especially with the boys, one of them, um, as he's getting up to take his test and getting ready to leave, you know, he wanted a hug. And he all year has been doing this playful thing with me, and I know he settles down and gets to work because I tell him, "Come on." You know. "We got this." He'll...I can use it to my advantage, but I've always felt a little uneasy about it, too, like he was flirting or something like that. So when he asked for a hug at the end of the year, I just kinda, "How 'bout a handshake?" You know? And that was the kind of thing whereas the girls, I trusted them. Him, I just don't trust it's the same relationship. Even though I've used them both to my advantage to get the kids to work better and maybe get them to do things they wouldn't have done otherwise, and stay longer after school, you know? Him I feel like it's a different feeling than what it was with the girls

because, I don't know, I trusted him to interpret it the wrong way. Whereas I trusted the girls to interpret it the right way. (Interview 3, 6/18/12)

Paula proposed that there was a “right” way and a “wrong” way to interpret her relationships with these students, and the wrong way involved the possibility for heterosexual desire. Her relationship with the group of girls was understood as innocent and led to the girls working harder and learning more than they likely would have if their teacher had been someone they did not like or respect. Paula did not experience a possibility of desire in this same-gender relationship, so it was “safe” for her to be close with these girls. In contrast, the male student pushed the boundaries of “innocent” teacher and student relationships in ways that made her uneasy and exposed the “fragility and vulnerability of women teachers to unsolicited inscriptions of their bodies as sexualized” (Atkinson, 2008, p. 112). Paula used the fact that he liked her all year to build rapport and convince him to do his work, but she was not sure she made the right decision because this particular student made her feel “uneasy” about their friendly interactions. This boy was socially sanctioned to “play” with his attraction to her because in heteronormative culture, men are allowed to express their desire for women even when the desire is unwanted. His expression of power over her diminished the possibility for her to have authority in her role as his teacher. While she was able to influence the student's behavior in her classroom, she also surrendered authority because he was likely responsive to her requests because he was attracted to her, not because he respected her.

### **Possible Gender Transgressions**

When participants acknowledged the differences between their experiences as heterosexual-identified teachers and as those of their gay colleagues', they described multiple ways that surveillance regulates the professional and personal lives of teachers. Teachers are

“expected to have exemplary sexual lives outside the school” (Epstein & Johnson, 1998, p. 123) as defined by heteronormative standards for gender performance and family life. Further, teachers are expected to fulfill the role of “‘moral guardian,’ setting an example for children and regulating youthful sexualities” (p. 123). If teachers are perceived to be setting an immoral example—or if they question the institutional (i.e. heteronormative) definition of morality, “then their lives may become the subject of scandal, even moral panic” (p. 123). Although some participants had experiences of self-censoring the details of their personal lives they allowed to be known at school, they also recognized that being a heterosexual teacher allowed them freedoms in their identity expression and in their relationships with students that their LGBTQ colleagues do not experience.

**Sharing home life.** Stories of heterosexual family life were allowed in school, and teachers frequently referenced their children, husbands, or fiancées in classroom discussions. Participants who did not totally conform to the idealized identity of “moral guardian” did not share details about their lives. Susan was married by the time the research began, but before she was married she made conscious decisions about omitting details from the personal narratives she shared with students:

And I remember I used to feel [uncomfortable] when, um, my husband was still my boyfriend, especially when we were living together, because I didn't know how that would be taken in the community as a whole, you know, if it would be judged, because obviously we weren't married. Um, and sometimes, you know, I hear about how conservative the area is. It's predominantly Republican, very conservative... And so I do kinda not want to open any uncomfortable doors or anything and say, you know... I wouldn't want a parent to get upset with me because I was talking about this in class

and... You know. But, um, after a while I got over it, though, and was like, “Whatever. Whatever. Yeah, we live together.” Especially when we were engaged. Who cares at this point? (Interview 2, 4/25/12)

Susan’s decision to limit the types of personal disclosures she made to her students were in response to the assumption that a “conservative” community would believe that a woman should not live with a man before they are married. This risk cites the possibility of women being labeled as “promiscuous” or “whore” if she has sex outside of marriage. Although she eventually decided that the risk was minor and “got over it,” it is significant that the possibility of moral judgment was enough to make her question the propriety of her relationship. As a woman teacher, she is expected to be a model for her female students, which includes modeling resistance to men’s sexual advances—*not* modeling the possibility of successful romantic relationships outside the context of marriage (see Epstein & Johnon, 1998). Susan drew connections between her discomfort and the possibility that her gay colleague may hide details about his personal life from his students:

I kind of wonder if he feels that he can't talk about his home life sometimes, because he loves to cook and he'll cook things and bring them in, and I don't think he'll ever tell a story of...you know, whereas I might say, “I made this last night and my husband loved it, so I thought I'd make it for you.” You know, any kind of story like that, I always wonder if he's comfortable making those kinds of comments to his students.

Once Susan got married, she was granted implicit permission to talk about her home life at school. During the research project, students knew she and her husband bought a house, were spending a lot of time painting, and were moving at the end of the school year. Sharing these routines of married life posed zero risk because they aligned with the heteronormative cultural

narrative of the early stages of marriage. Her gay colleague, on the other hand, cannot escape the risk of being interpreted as deviant or perceived as a threat to the innocence and well-being of his students because of his sexual identity (Endo, Reece-Miller, & Santavicca, 2010; Hardie, 2012). Her example of sharing stories about cooking was intended to illustrate how their relationships are similar, but his same-sex partnership is a gender norm violation and stigmatized in ways that puts him at risk for judgment from students and parents and punishment from school leaders. In short, Susan is allowed to talk about her marriage because she will be perceived as a model heterosexual woman, and her stories of marriage model a moral and respectable way of life. Her gay colleague's stories of home life would put him at risk for moral judgment from colleagues, students, and parents.

**Are you a lesbian?** One of the risks that teacher allies experience is the possibility that they will be interpreted as LGBTQ themselves (Schmidt et al., 2012). This possibility of being labeled with a stigmatized identity puts them in “the line of fire” where “they will be called to account for their identity, be questioned, are not fully accepted, are ‘tolerated,’ feel ‘socially awkward,’ or feel they are being stereotyped” (Orne, 2013, p. 240). In the context of this research, teachers did not talk about managing this possibility by altering or limiting their support for LGBTQ students, but two educators had experiences that illustrated how ally work can lead people to the conclusion that they are gay. However, the possibility of such questions is also related to the teacher's gender expression, and Karen believed that questions about her sexual orientation were likely more about perceptions of her interpretations than her beliefs about LGBTQ equality:

Did I ever tell you that somebody had written on a desk that “[her name] is gay”? Did I ever tell you that?



Mel: No.

K: Yeah. It was either here or at [previous school district]. I can't remember which. And I was like, "Wow." Um, and I, obviously, I actually, I think...people probably question that about me because I do a lot of sports, and I don't have a husband and, um, you know, I have had a boyfriend but I don't, I don't talk about it. When I did have a boyfriend I just didn't really discuss it. And, uh, I remember now, not being upset but being like, "Wow. That's kind of surprising." And I remember thinking, well, you know, in fact, I had a, I had a gay, um, teacher at my old district ask me if I was gay, too. She was like, "Are you part of the, are you a church member?" [laughs] And I said, "No, no, I'm not. But I'm honorary." You know? So I know I'm, people are a little unclear 'cause I...for whatever reason. And it didn't bother me. So, maybe some kids think I'm gay, too. (Interview 3, 6/21/12)

Karen interjected these stories into a conversation about which teachers in her school are likely to talk about LGBTQ identities in class. In this context, it was unclear if she presented these experiences as illustration that she *is* a teacher who talks about LGBTQ identities, if the conversation had triggered a memory that informs her thinking about LGBTQ inclusion, or if she simply wanted an opportunity to include these experiences in the data. She listed several qualities that she believed would lead students and colleagues to the conclusion that she is gay. These qualities illustrate ways that she does not conform to traditional gender norms: she is unmarried and athletic. Her age (mid 40s), appearance (short hair and thin, muscular body), and pictures around the room of the sports she enjoys reinforced her gender transgression. Like Susan, she did not discuss her long-term relationships because they had not earned the social approval that comes with marriage, so the students had not been exposed to any information that

would “prove” her heterosexuality. So, while it is possible that the student had intended the label “gay” as a colloquial term for expressing displeasure with her class, she could imagine students coming to the conclusion that she was a lesbian because many of the things they know about her fit the stereotype. She claimed she did not feel “bothered” or at professional risk because students and colleagues have considered this possibility, but it led her to question how students may interpret her.

When Rachel received questions about her sexual orientation, they were a direct result of her growing reputation as a teacher who LGBTQ students seek out for support. This trend started with a few students, and over time those kids started bringing their friends to her classroom and eventually she became a known resource for LGBTQ students. Both teachers and students “joked” with her that she must be gay to earn this reputation:

Um, you know, people just used to, you know, like, you know, joke about it. But not in like a mean way. Just say, like, “Everybody's coming to you.” Like, “why do all...” And then the girls want to joke with me. I got a, uh, a rainbow colored notepad. Had nothing to do with them. They were like, “Miss, you're really gay.” “No, I'm really not.” They're just funny. You know kids. (Interview 2, 6/19/12)

Rachel did not know how she came to have such a strong reputation as an ally, but she thought it was “funny” that it had led some to the conclusion that she must be gay, too. She said that colleagues were not really serious or “mean” when they made jokes, and it was generally known throughout the school that she is married to a man and has two children. However, the fact that they commented on her sexuality illustrated how her professional practice had transgressed the boundaries of “normal” teaching practice and gender performance. Rachel’s support for LGBTQ students extended beyond providing safe, homophobia-free learning environments. If all support

occurred within the “safe classroom” context, her teacher and gender identities would have fit neatly into the archetype of the “caring” or “motherly” teacher. Instead, LGBTQ students—many of whom were not her academic students—also spent time in her classroom before and after school, which increased the visibility and scrutiny of her support for LGBTQ students. However, Rachel did not interpret these questions as surveillance or as limitations to her ability to support these students:

I think that sometimes it’s easier to be a straight teacher talking to [LGBTQ] kids.

Because it’s not like, you know, and I think also people have some warped perceptions especially of males wanting to be with younger males you know? And I think that that can be incredibly difficult also because, you know, a lot...there’s, you know. You’ve got to be careful. I mean that’s just in general. So, I think, you know, with gay males that are in our building, it’s, it’s, very, you know, like to have other gay males that want to bond is a--you know, like teenagers, I think that that would be a situation that people can perceive as being very dangerous for their end because of the perception in our society.

(Interview 2, 6/19/12)

As a straight teacher, Rachel believed she had more freedom than her gay colleagues did to develop relationships with LGBTQ students, and this was because she did not feel vulnerable to the same kinds of scrutiny or judgment that they might experience. Because it was well-known that she is married to a man—thus proving her heterosexuality—she believed she was more able to have direct conversations with students about their dating experiences, family experiences, or marginalization in the school. In contrast, her gay colleagues faced the risk of being accused of inappropriate relationships with their students because of the stigma that gay men are pedophiles or unable to control their sexual desires. In other words, they could be construed as dangerous,

threatening, or corruptive, but Rachel's proven heterosexuality allows her to hold on to her position as a safe, nurturing teacher.

### **Teachers as Gender Role Models**

Schools provide few options for fulfilling educators to fulfill institutional expectations for “good” or “effective” teaching. Schools have academic goals and an obligation to prevent violence, but they are also expected to socialize students in ways that will set them up to be successful adults. Teachers are the role models for that future success, and as such their professional personas are under surveillance to determine if they are appropriate “moral guardians” (Epstein & Johnson, 1998) for their students. In a culture that values heterosexual marriage and family life above all other possible life trajectories, teachers who model “successful” (i.e. “normal”) interpretations of heteronormative gender roles reassure parents and school leaders that they are entrusting their children's learning to good people. In the participants' reflections about how gender norms had been significant to their professional experience, they offered insight to the possibilities for being recognized as both a “good” woman and teacher. Teachers who support LGBTQ students by incorporating these students' needs into their work as *caring teachers* do the critical work of making these youth feel as safe and secure as possible. Further, their reflections provide insights to threats to professionalism—and how those threats are really the manifestation of a double standard. Susan felt the threat of punishment for living with her boyfriend, and Paula felt threat of losing her authority because male students were inappropriate with her. Women experienced possibilities for punishment that men do not.

Perhaps more importantly, these reflections also provide a glimpse into how teachers' gender transgressions might contribute to the larger project of blurring the boundaries of binary

gender categories—both by providing students with alternative images of womanhood and through the ways these “different” or “transgressive” gender performances create better opportunities for actually creating cultural change. Megan’s identity claim of “bitchy” is one that represents qualities and professional practices such as complaining to administrators, recommending changes, and pushing until she gets answers. These qualities might be interpreted as *leadership* if they came from men (Blount, 1996). Instead of only providing the safe classroom, the bitchy teacher might be impatient with injustice and willing to do or say things to change policy and practice. Instead of just providing individual support to students, the bitchy teacher would be more inclined to take action in the interest of institutional or cultural change. The “maybe lesbian” teacher potentially challenges assumptions about the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality, about how to be a woman, and about how to be a straight person. These brief moments of identity ambiguity may also demonstrate that consistently performing “straightness” or being surrounded by straightness is not important or ideal. Modeling how to include different kinds of gender and sexualities in their lives, to enjoy those parts of their lives, and to allow different interpretations of their genders and sexualities to happen shows students that one does not have to be perfectly straight to not be gay—and that maybe troubling the lines between the two categories is worthwhile.

### **Summary**

Wilkinson and Pearson (2009) argue that “[w]hen a greater number of individuals within a school operate within heteronormative schemas, heteronormativity acquires more legitimacy and power, creating a relational context that limits available outlets for adolescent sexuality and stigmatizes same-sex desire” (p. 546). Individuals who operate within heteronormative schemas conform to strictly defined binary gender categories, assume that all peers and educators are

heterosexual and gender conforming, and are invested in maintaining the claim to social privilege that comes with heterosexual identity. Teacher interviews and the interactional patterns observed in the classrooms indicate that, despite participants' investment in creating more inclusive environments for LGBTQ youth, conforming to strict gender roles is still the order of business in their classrooms. Teachers took binary gendered differences for granted, and students fell into traditional heteronormative roles—girls quiet and boys boisterous. These roles were intertwined with boys' pervasive demonstrations of male privilege. Hegemonic masculinity was highly visible and teachers' pedagogy was shaped around managing male privilege without getting caught in power struggles with their male students. Girls' positions were subordinate to boys' and if girls wanted to speak, they had to negotiate these dynamics in ways that avoided conflict but also made their requests for teacher attention clear. Teachers also conformed to heteronormative expectations, and they faced questions or felt “uneasy” when they tested the boundaries of acceptable gender expression for teachers.

The ways that participants talked about their own and their students' gender roles and the gender dynamics in participants' classrooms are indicative of school cultures where “normal” student identity is dependent on binary gender categories. Ngo (2003), argues that “student [and adult] discourses of ‘normal’ gender and sexuality make the school feel unsafe for [LGBTQ] students” (p. 118), and this is largely because youth (and adults) take up these categories as they decide who to target for being different, who to harass for violating normalcy in particularly egregious ways—like same-sex attraction or cross-gender clothing. Engaging in this sort of policing is an avenue to social status and often occurs in peer interactions that themselves seem innocuous or “normal” (Payne & Smith, 2013; Pascoe, 2013; Ringrose & Renold, 2010). Conceptualizing ally work in ways that maintain distance from direct engagement with gender

and sexual diversity issues allows these social dynamics go unchallenged and, implicitly, grants permission for youth to continue using gender as a tool to determine who deserves social status and who does not. These findings point to a need to rethink how teachers are educated about adolescent identity formation, how schools reinforce gendered assumptions about student development, and how conversations about topics such as male privilege need to become the status quo in K-12 schools.

## Chapter 7: CONCLUSION

By engaging these nine participants in extended conversations about their professional practice and spending time watching them teach, it was possible to gain insight to how they interpret their responsibilities to LGBTQ students and how they envision optimal classroom environments for their students. The significance of their experiences and their willingness to share them cannot be underestimated because they provide valuable examples of how teachers address a known problem like LGBTQ harassment even when they do not feel sufficiently knowledgeable about LGBTQ students' experiences, when they worry about resistance to classroom conversations about LGBTQ identities, or when they are not completely sure how to make a classroom feel safe and comfortable for all.

By bringing together the concepts of *teacher identity* and *ally identity*, it was possible to reach a more complicated understanding of how teachers integrate advocacy or support for a marginalized group into their professional lives. Rather than thinking of ally work as an “add on” to a long list of roles and responsibilities, the research questions targeted greater understanding of the connections between support for LGBTQ students and other teacher work such as daily instruction, developing rapport and relationships with students, behavior management, and setting expectations for engaging in the classroom community. This framework also allowed for analysis of the professional norms that shape the possibilities for LGBTQ support and advocacy in K-12 schools, as well as how participants understood “who” LGBTQ students are in the school. Participants consistently described their professional identities with language such as “open,” “accepting,” and “welcoming” of “all students,” and they made the case for treating LGBTQ students just like their peers. They situated their professional responsibilities and awareness of LGBTQ youth in the school within the larger framework of “supporting diversity,”



and they understood this to mean that all students deserve equal access to education in an environment where they are not judged or threatened. The category of “LGBTQ youth” was constructed as a category of adolescents that is at higher risk than the general population for distress or trauma due to the possibility that they will experience discrimination or harassment. Teachers met the standards of “good teaching” by eliminating discriminatory behaviors from their classrooms and by judging or excluding LGBTQ students in any way. This work could be done through teaching or modeling tolerance, but participants claimed that most work related to support for LGBTQ students occurred through their openness to learning about students’ lives and working with their LGBTQ students as if they were “normal” teenagers, rather than being preoccupied by their differences.

Participants’ discussions of their teaching practices that were particularly relevant to supporting LGBTQ students reflected the language of their identity narratives in that they connected support for LGBTQ students to generalized interpretations of “safe classroom,” “tolerance,” and “diversity.” That is, participants provided far more examples of teaching strategies that were intended to meet the needs of all—and therefore were understood to automatically cover the needs of LGBTQ students—than examples of educational practices that were specifically serving the needs of LGBTQ students. These strategies included attention to the “comfort” of their classrooms, using curriculum to facilitate community-building, teaching and modeling tolerance, and developing students’ curiosity and knowledge about cultures and ways of living that are different from their own. Significantly, these strategies mostly focused on developing privileged or “normal” students’ capacity for accepting difference, which in turn defined LGBTQ youth as a category of students that is outside or different from “normal” students and needs to be accepted into the mainstream population. This tension between treating

LGBTQ students like “everybody else” and relying on tolerance education as a mechanism for improving their school experiences recurred throughout the data. Ultimately, teachers’ strategies focused on making the students more tolerant of LGBTQ identities, rather than changing school or classroom culture in ways that will value the differences and contributions of LGBTQ students.

Based on the observation data, the participants’ strategies for supporting LGBTQ youth were successful in that students were not observed behaving in ways that were overtly homophobic or transphobic. The findings do not include any examples of students saying “that’s so gay,” “no homo,” or targeting peers with any other epithets that are both abusive *and* considered to be “normal” youth speech. However, heterosexual privilege and male privilege circulated in many observed classrooms in ways that made it difficult to imagine how gender non-conforming students could feel comfortable or safe in these classrooms. Teachers relied on stereotypical understandings of boys’ and girls’ educational needs to make decisions about instruction and classroom management—focusing their energy on raising girls’ academic confidence and on limiting boys’ impulses. Boys’ movement, interruptions, and bids for attention shaped the social dynamics of participants’ classrooms, and the teachers reported tailoring their pedagogy to accommodate and negotiate boys’ behavior. The consequence of these strategies was that heteronormative social hierarchies were unchallenged. Teachers’ positions were also, in some ways, subordinate to this dominant masculinity because the available strategies for managing these behaviors were those that avoided engagement in power struggles. This was particularly true for younger teachers, as male students often interacted with them as if they were peers rather than authority figures. Despite participants’ complaints about the “boy problem” in some of their classes, these social dynamics were taken-for-granted as

normal experiences of working with groups of teenage boys. Participants did not raise questions about how girls or LGBTQ students experience these classroom power dynamics, nor did they consider the possibility that such masculine performances could be disrupted.

Possibly the most significant barrier to disrupting heteronormativity was that the institutionally-sanctioned professional positions and teaching strategies are themselves shaped by heteronormative expectations for ideal student identities and ideal teacher role models. As women teachers, they experienced expectations to be caring, patient, and a moral guide for their students (Alsup, 2006; Boler, 1999; Britzman, 1991). “Care” was a readily available framework for them to talk about their support for LGBTQ students because, despite the stigmatization of LGBTQ identities, a truly caring teacher would not be meeting her responsibilities if she excluded any student (Smith, in press). Some participants connected this type of care to their experiences as mothers and claimed they took on “motherly” qualities in the classroom such as being protective and nurturing. These gendered professional practices were understood to be assets in their efforts to support LGBTQ students. Other teachers reported experiencing limitations that were specifically tied to their gender such as not being perceived as authority figures like their male colleagues or feeling like they needed to hide details about their personal lives because they were not married. Straying outside these boundaries of traditional femininity came with the possibility of being labeled as lesbian or immoral and, while the teachers who have experienced this reported it did not personally bother them, historically such as label has been accompanied by severe professional consequences (Blount, 1996 & 2000). These experiences illuminate the degree to which heteronormative expectations shape the experiences of all members of school communities and how, even when school personnel are invested in

finding space for non-conforming students to feel safe and flourish, they are also modeling conformity to traditional gender expectations.

It would be easy to interpret the participants' superficial acknowledgment of non-normative gender and sexual identities as inadequacy or failure. If teacher allies are not talking about how gender and sexual identity are relevant to how students experience their schooling—or are even aware of how heteronormative structures are shaping students' and teachers' experiences of school—then what educator will? How could their classrooms possibly be inclusive for LGBTQ students? How could they possibly be expressing authentic care to their students? Interpreting the data in this way would be too simplistic, and it would place blame on individual educators without examining the social and political contexts of education and LGBTQ youth advocacy in the U.S. Instead, the intention of this dissertation is to provide a glimpse into how teachers are engaging in the work of supporting LGBTQ students at this historical moment and in a specific geographical context. Close examination of their descriptions of their own pedagogy, professional identity narratives, and observations of the social dynamics in their classrooms provided insight to how ally educators understand the possibilities and professional standards for educating LGBTQ youth, implement these practices to make their classrooms as inclusive as possible, but do little to disrupt the power of heterosexuality and normative gender expressions in their schools. In short, these research findings highlight how hard it is to de-stabilize the heteronormative powerbase in U.S. secondary schools.

An ally pedagogy that does not directly engage with issues of gender and sexuality has obvious limitations to its capacity to disrupt the marginalization of LGBTQ youth in schools, but it is important to remember that the teachers who advocate this sort of work are operating within a “societal rule of silence” (Fredman et al., 2013) around LGBTQ issues. Participants were

indeed committed to eradicating expressions of homophobia—particularly those specifically targeting or occurring in the vicinity of their known LGBTQ students—but the sexual and gender identities of their students (as well as their own) were largely erased from their narratives of support and ally identity, much like LGBTQ youths’ experiences of navigating heteronormativity and social stigma in their schools has been erased from the broader social problem of LGBTQ bullying (Payne & Smith, 2013). This means that even when teachers are openly committed to being allies for their LGBTQ students, they are likely working in contexts where open conversations about gender or sexuality are not supported. Teachers were careful to connect any mention of LGBTQ identity to the institutionally-sanctioned curriculum so that any resistance to such content can be met with an “academic” rationale. Supporting students by developing safe classroom community or teaching lessons of tolerance is much less risky. However, as Mayo (2002) argues “in approaching questions of bias, diversity, and difference through the manufacture of ‘safe spaces,’ we may neglect examining for whom those spaces are safe and why” (p. 185). In the case of improving the school experiences of LGBTQ youth, this means asking how and why schools are *unsafe*, and which students do not have to worry about these questions of safety? Fox (2007) recommends allies to consider the question: “What if queers were to *demand* safe space? How might this demand change the power relations between those who ‘create’ safe spaces and those who are intended to benefit from such spaces?” (p. 503). Such questions open avenues towards a more radical pedagogy (Youdell, 2011) through which oppressive structures can be critiqued and disrupted.

### **Implications**

The findings of this research highlight a need to raise educator knowledge and awareness about “who” LGBTQ students are and how they experience marginalization. The teachers in this

study stated commitment to inclusive and safe schools for all, and they all recognized LGBTQ students as a group that is particularly vulnerable to exclusion and violence. However, their lack of direct engagement with issues of sexual and gender diversity—and their focus on discriminatory attitudes and behaviors as the problem to be solved—stimulate questions about what these teachers are missing by using this “difference blind” (Tarca, 2005) approach. What new understanding of their students could be developed if they recognized gender and sexuality to be relevant to how youth experience school? How might their own (unexamined) heterosexual privilege create barriers between themselves and their LGBTQ students? How is that privilege limiting their understanding of the marginalization LGBTQ students experience? What facets of their LGBTQ students’ school experiences are they overlooking when they choose to focus on the “sameness” between LGBTQ students and their heterosexual peers? Are there expressions of sexual or gender identity that are too transgressive to draw such connections of sameness? Are there student experiences that are too “queer” to fit into generalized diversity frameworks where sexuality and gender are hardly mentioned?

In light of these findings, the goal for change must be shifting teacher allies’ practice in ways that will make it possible for youth who transgress binary gender categories and heteronormative expectations will be valued in school environments. This would be a cultural revolution because it would mean that schools have stopped assuming that all students are gender conforming and rewarding the most successful examples of masculinity and femininity. While it is unlikely that this sort of cultural shift will occur in the short-term (if ever), there are four areas of change that could better equip teachers to navigate heteronormative school cultures and take a more critical approach to equitable, justice-oriented classroom practice: teacher education, professional development, educational leadership, and future research.

## Teacher Education

Teacher education has an important role to play in advancing equity and social justice projects in school because it potentially creates a foundation for how teachers conceptualize issues of inequality and schooling. LGBTQ educational issues are not typically addressed in teacher education programs in any meaningful way, and when they are it is usually in the context of anti-bullying or mental health risk (Jennings & Macgillivray, 2011; Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008; Sherwin & Jennings, 2006). This means that LGBTQ youth are being described as victimized youth who need therapeutic intervention, rather than as youth who, just like their heterosexual peers, have potential to make valuable contributions to school culture. Additionally, this framework for teaching pre-service teachers about LGBTQ students individualizes issues of marginalization and violence, which results in focusing interventions on correcting abusive behaviors and attitudes without also examining the cultural roots of peer-to-peer aggression. In order to provide educators with more critical and complicated frames of reference, teacher education—and subsequent professional development—needs to include content that is focused on providing their graduates with tools for understanding LGBTQ marginalization as an issue of inequality, rather than as an issue of bullies targeting victims. Such a curriculum would include: (1) information about sex, gender, and sexuality—how they are different *and* how they are connected; (2) education on institutional heteronormativity and how schools privilege heterosexuality and gender normativity through policy, curriculum, school traditions and rituals, and disciplinary practices; (3) exposure to research on gendered bullying and harassment, which argues that much of the aggression that occurs between peers serves the purposes of policing the boundaries of “normal” gender performance and raising the aggressor’s social status; (4) tools for using their knowledge about heteronormativity and schooling to

critically analyze their own teaching practices and the social dynamics of their classes in order to identify opportunities for destabilizing heterosexual privilege; (7) tools and strategies for recognizing and interrupting gender-based aggression; and (6) tools and strategies for integrating gender and sexual diversity into curriculum. Collectively, these recommendations are focused on helping teachers connect theoretical knowledge about LGBTQ marginalization to classroom practice. The hope is that having more experience with gender and sexual diversity *before* teachers enter the schools will help them make pedagogical choices that are focused creating equitable educational experiences and maintaining the dignity of their students, regardless of the professional culture in which they work.

### **Professional Development**

In order for teachers engage with the complicated project of recognizing how heteronormativity shapes their own classroom practice, they need opportunities to increase their knowledge about the intersections between gender, sexuality, and schooling. Therefore, professional development is key to providing the teachers in this study with the tools to push beyond the safe and comfortable frameworks of “safe space,” “anti-bullying,” or “tolerance” for supporting LGBTQ youth. Such professional development would ideally occur in a small group context and allow teachers to work toward increase the gender and sexual diversity competency over an extended period of time—such as a semester or school year. Curriculum for such professional development would include examining one’s privileged positions as White, straight, middle class educators; critically examining their curriculum in order to recognize gender biases and heterosexism; identifying opportunities to challenge the biases in their curriculum and increase the recognition of gender and sexual diversity within curriculum; and critical reflection on how gender norms shape their interactions with students and how the proliferation of gender



stereotypes that occur through instruction and classroom management. Throughout this long term professional development experience, educators would be expected to implement learning into classroom practice, reflect on those experiences, and work with the small professional group to learn and improve through each implementation experience. Engaging in this type of professional training would provide teachers with opportunities to acquire nuanced, in-depth knowledge about the relationships between gender, sexuality, and education and provide teachers with support and guidance as they try new practices aimed at disruption institutional heteronormativity.

### **Educational Leadership**

A significant and memorable finding of this research was the degree which male privilege circulated through the participants' classrooms. Hegemonically masculine boys dominated the social dynamics, interrupted instruction, flirted with teachers, and policed one another's gender—all of which occurred with only minor interventions from the participating teachers. Previous research has found that institutional factors contribute to the normalization of hypermasculinity—and, subsequently, homophobia (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). Therefore, efforts to disrupt patterns of male privilege must extend beyond the efforts of classroom teachers. School leaders will have an important role in such efforts. Principals who are informed about how pervasive male privilege affects the entire school community will be in the best position to provide leadership and establish a philosophy of gender equality throughout the school environment. Such leadership would require awareness of how hegemonically masculine boys assert power in the classroom by policing other boys' gender, severely limiting the possibilities for all other students to speak or otherwise engage in classroom community, and undermining female teachers' professionalism through flirtation, sexual harassment, or refusing to recognize

women as authority figures. All of these patterns reinforce the idea that men and women are expected to fall into two complementary categories and limit the possibilities for recognizing identities outside those norms. School leaders who are engaged with such issues provide professional development for their teachers; create opportunities for students of all gender and sexual identities to be rewarded and celebrated; communicate a clear message to the school community that sexual and gender diversity are to be recognized and valued in the school community.

### **Future Research**

Continued scholarship about LGBTQ allies will be necessary to gain in-depth understanding of the complicated work of disrupting heteronormativity in K-12 public schools. This scholarship must, first and foremost, focus on giving voice to more teachers who are informed about gender and sexual diversity and the experiences of LGBTQ youth and taking specific actions to disrupt marginalization in school and classroom environments. The teachers in this study lend valuable insight to the work that is being done in schools, but more examples of exemplary teacher allies will provide the field with valuable information about what kinds of transformative pedagogy are possible. Second, future research needs to focus on larger sample sizes and a more diverse sample of teacher allies who work in diverse contexts. The perspectives of teachers of color and teachers who work in rural and urban schools are needed to begin compiling a more complete picture of the possibilities and limitations of teacher ally practice. Third, future analyses of this data and the data of future studies needs to continue pushing possible intersections between LGBTQ and White ally identity. In particular, closer examination of the issues of ally complicity will potentially lend valuable insight to the limitations—and possible dangers—of the “ally” framework for affirming and educating socially marginalized

youth. Because so little data on allies' work in K-12 schools is available—particularly classroom observation data—it is important that these research efforts focus on the need to spend time in classrooms and understand what it looks like when hegemonic genders are privileged, as well as what it looks like when teachers and students successfully create moments when gender and sexual diversity are recognized and valued.

### **Conclusions**

Collectively, the nine participants presented a model of “ally” this is focused on care, tolerance, and safety. Because discrimination is a reality of school environments and threatens the well-being of LGBTQ youth, participants were doing important work to minimize the injurious effects and position themselves as teachers who respect these youth and are invested in their success. They are valuable assets to their schools because they are doing work—and talked to a researcher about work—that is still not widely accepted in the field of education. However, their positive contributions to their schools' cultures are only a starting point. Their attention to students' safety and emotional needs and their attempts to affirm LGBTQ students' identities provide glimpses into the possibilities for transformative pedagogy—pedagogy that could shift school cultures in ways that would make “safe spaces” unnecessary because the school community would value this kind of diversity. However, the persistence of rigid gender norms and heteronormative expectations continued to circulate through participants' classrooms and illuminated the need for more professional development and more creative methods for destabilizing heterosexual privilege. Creating a more knowledgeable collective of teachers will create new opportunities for increasing *student* knowledge about gender and sexual diversity, starting school-wide conversations about institutional privileging of heterosexuality, and developing new rituals for rewarding students that are inclusive of all gender performances.

These shifts will contribute to the development of school cultures where gender and sexuality differences are valuable and affirmed.

Appendix A  
**School Demographic Data<sup>20</sup>**

<b>School</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Hisp/Lat</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Multirace</b>	<b>Limited English Prof.</b>	<b>Free/Reduced Lunch</b>	<b>Enrollment</b>
<b>School 1</b>	Suburban	High School	87%	3%	2%	8%	0%	1%	7%	1577
<b>School 2</b>	Suburban	High School	92%	2%	2%	1%	3%	No data	32%	1389
<b>School 3</b>	Rural	Middle School	95%	2%	1%	1%	1%	No data	39%	568
<b>School 4</b>	Urban	K-8	43%	46%	5%	4%	1%	2%	53%	705
<b>School 5</b>	Urban	High School	17%	70%	8%	1%	3%	3%	70%	1294

<sup>20</sup> New York State Report Cards, 2011-2012. <https://reportcards.nysed.gov/schools.php?district=800000040902&year=2012>

Appendix B  
Invitation to Participate

**Research participation requested for female, straight-identified public school (middle and high school level) teachers who are supportive of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) students.**

October 2011

Dear Educator:

My name is Melissa Smith, and I am a PhD candidate at the Syracuse University School of Education. I am writing to invite you to participate in my dissertation research project. This is a qualitative study examining the experiences of female, straight-identified public school teachers who are supportive of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) students. To date, education research on improving school environments for LGBT students includes very little data from teachers who work to support this group of students. Your participation will make a significant contribution to the field of education's knowledge about teacher experiences with LGBT students and the process of improving school environments for LGBT youth.

Data will be collected through interviews and classroom observations. The first interview will be a "life history" interview where teachers will be asked broad questions about their professional beliefs and practices. Each teacher will be observed 4-6 times, and each observation will last approximately 2 hours. Through these observations, I will come to better understand what a supportive classroom looks like. Two follow-up interviews—one after the second observation and one after the last observation—will ask clarification questions about my observations of the classroom practice and provide participants the opportunity to add to what they want to share about their practice. Data collection will occur between November 2011 and March 2012.

The data for this study will be kept confidential. Participants' names and schools will be replaced by pseudonyms in all transcripts, notes and in any publications generated from this data. Geographic location will not be disclosed in any research documents. Data will not be shared with school administration at any time. Audio recordings of interviews will be kept in a password-protected file on the researcher's personal computer.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me via email or telephone. Also, please feel free to contact me with any questions about participating in this research.

Sincerely,

Melissa Smith  
PhD Candidate  
Syracuse University School of Education  
mjsmit13@syr.edu  
c: (402) 321-4733

## Appendix C Research Proposal to School Districts

### Research Purpose and Rationale

Schools and educators are being called on to provide “safe and supportive” learning environments for all students, and yet successfully supporting a diverse community of students is still something schools and teachers struggle to accomplish. Educational research has made progress toward understanding the school experiences of socially marginalized student identity groups, but the experiences of educators who work to support and include *all* students in their classrooms is largely absent from educational research. As pressure intensifies in U.S. K-12 contexts to provide safe and supportive educational environments—and as the implementation of New York’s Dignity for All Students Act approaches—it is important to gain insight to the experiences of educators who have taken on this work and draw implications that can be applied to teacher education and professional development programming. To date, education research, policy and best practices on creating safe and inclusive cultures includes very little data from teachers who make a point to include lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students in their understanding of school diversity. Therefore, this qualitative research project will focus on teachers who recognize the needs of this group of students.

### Methodology

Data will be collected through teacher interviews and participant observations. Interviews will explore teachers’ perspectives and experiences related to creating safe and inclusive classroom cultures for a diverse community of learners. Observations will focus on professional practice and address two overarching questions: (1) What does a supportive, inclusive classroom look like? and (2) How do teachers create that culture on a day-to-day basis?

Interviews will take place at a time and location that is convenient for each individual teacher. Three interviews will take place over the research period—one before observations begin; one at the mid-point of observations; and one after observations have been completed. Four to six observations will take place over an approximately 6 week period following the first interview. Each observation will be approximately 2 hours, depending on teachers’ individual class schedules.

### Confidentiality Procedures

The data for this study will be kept confidential. Participants’ names and schools will be replaced by pseudonyms in all transcripts, notes and in any publications generated from this data. Geographic location of school districts will not be disclosed in any research documents. The document containing participants’ names and schools of employment will be kept in a password-protected file on the researcher’s personal computer. Transcripts, field notes and other data generated through work with individual teachers will only be available to Melissa Smith (researcher) and Dr. Elizabeth Payne (university supervisor). These documents will not be made available to school administration or Syracuse University personnel outside the

research team at any time. Audio recordings of interviews and digital files (Word, Excel) containing data will be kept in a password-protected file on the researcher's personal computer. If they so wish, participants will be allowed to view the data generated from their own interviews and observations, but not those of other research participants.



Appendix D  
Life History Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about becoming a teacher.
2. How would you describe yourself as a teacher?
3. What are the core values in your school? (Meyers' dissertation)
4. What are the expectations of teachers in this school?
  - a. How do you describe your role as a teacher in this school?
  - b. What are your responsibilities according to the school? According to you?
5. What do you see as important problems in your school? (Meyers' dissertation)
6. Describe your students.
  - a. What do you think are some of the differences between your students?
  - b. Have you ever experienced tension in your classes in relation to student differences?
  - c. Can you describe an example? What did you do? How are these differences resolved/addressed?
7. Tell me about your relationships with your students.
8. How would you describe the culture (word choice) of your classroom?
  - a. What is your role in/what are your strategies for creating that culture?
9. Tell me about a time when a "controversial topic" was an issue in your class. What did you do? (leading?)
10. What are your early memories about gender? About sexuality? (word choice? Sexual orientation?) LGBT people/identities?
11. What do you know about the experiences of LGBT kids in your school? How have you come to know these things?
12. How did you come to describe yourself as supportive for LGBT students? (This works for the participants I have so far—who have all made the "supportive" claim.)

Appendix E  
Participant Demographics

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Relationship Status</b>	<b>School Type</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Years Professional Experience</b>
Molly	mid-40s	White	Married	Suburban	High School	AP United States History Psychology	21
Susan	Late-20s	White	Married	Suburban	Middle and High School	French	6
Laura	mid-40s	White	Married	Suburban	High School	Chemistry	8
Rachel	mid-30s	White	Married	Urban	High School	English	12
Megan	mid-50s	White	Married	Urban	Middle School	English	28
Karen	mid-40s	White	Single	Suburban	Middle and High School	German	15
Kelly	Late-20s	White	Engaged	Suburban	High School	Biology	2
Tina	Late 30s	White	Married	Rural	Middle School	Reading	15
Paula	Late 20s	White	Married	Suburban	High School	Global History and United States History	5

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