A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY EXPLORING
OUT COLLEGE STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES WITH
QUEER CONTENT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

by

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ABSTRACT

This study is in line with a growing body of educational research that seeks to investigate the complexities queer or questioning youth experience in their middle and high school environments regarding access to academic and support structures that address a spectrum of queer identities. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to learn directly from the perspectives of out college students about their everyday lived experiences navigating their secondary school years. The study was designed to better understand the levels of academic and support structures for participants in middle and high school, how participants learned about queer identities and possibilities during these years, and how they understood their lives in relation to the visibility of queer identities offered to them in school. Participants also offered recommendations in this study for making secondary school environments more supportive, better attuned to the identities and needs of queer or questioning youth, and more reflective of diverse identities in curricula, instruction, and overall programming.

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guided this study included: queer theory, multicultural education, and literacy. Nine diverse, out college students contributed to this study through interviews, focus groups, and a writing prompt, which asked them to write back to their former secondary schools and teachers. Study findings included themes of: (1) Absence or negative interactions with queer content in schools, (2) Learning about queer life as a queer or questioning adolescent, (3) Navigating secondary schools as a queer or questioning student, and (4) Queering identities, histories, and support structures in schools. Recommendations
participants offered for improving secondary schools for queer or questioning youth (and all students) focused on the following areas: (1) Curriculum, (2) Instruction, (3) Spaces and support structures, (4) Services, and (5) Policy. The themes and recommendations that are offered in this study are relevant for school systems, secondary school teachers, staff, and administrators, teacher education programs, researchers invested in qualitative inquiry, educational research, and local, state, and federal policymakers.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all queer youth:
To those who came before, paving a pathway of possibilities that helped ease the burden
To those who are forging a new model of how to live in a space of freedom of expression
To those who did not survive adolescence to shine and discover this brave new queer world

We know that some of you are still scared.
We know that some of you are still silent.
Just because it’s better now doesn’t mean that it’s always good.

Dreaming and loving and screwing.
None of these are identities.
Maybe when other people look at us, but not to ourselves.
We are so much more complicated than that.

David Levithan, Two Boys Kissing (2013)
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Deepest appreciation is extended to the beautifully unique participants who shared their stories and perspectives in this study. Your voices and contributions demonstrate the limitless possibilities queer people embody in our lives and in the world.
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CHAPTER I:  
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Extraordinary lives  
Keep crashing and tumbling by  
Somewhere there’s a sky for only me  
Diamonds in disguise  
Hiding like forgotten days  
All these tears of mine will fly away  
(Scissor Sisters-Somewhere)

Background

Young people growing up in the United States face a vastly new landscape in which to explore, negotiate, and live out their identities. Regardless of race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ability, religious beliefs, or geographic location, adolescents and young adults in the U.S. are experiencing profound shifts in the ways in which they come to understand the potential of living out their lives openly and honestly. Many young adults have opportunities to seek out the possibilities of divergent identities with minimal risk to their situated experiences. Others face an arduous and oftentimes traumatic journey in this negotiation. The opening quotation speaks to the conflicting experiences many youth undergo in this process as well as the deeply personal nature of identity exploration. For youth who openly identify, are questioning, or are projected to be queer in any context, the situated experiences in one’s home and community can reap transformative outcomes or can result in youth “crashing and tumbling by” (Sellards, Hoffman, & Ridha, 2011). We have witnessed far too many queer youth taking their lives, being pushed out of their homes and schools, and suppressing their identities as a result of homophobic oppression.
I would like to believe that emerging generations of youth are now growing up in a different day—a time in which society’s understandings of the complexities and intersectionality of identity politics are more nuanced and supportive on all fronts. Examples of this can be found in every facet of U.S. society, regardless of the vitriolic rhetoric that continues to whirl around underrepresented groups in many public spheres. Particularly, the ways in which queer youth have been rejecting the divisive, damaging, and oftentimes hateful ideologies that seek to regulate and govern their lives represents a monumental shift in this work. Children and youth growing up in the U.S. in 2014 decisively have more opportunities to explore, negotiate, and advocate for their rights than any generation before them. This can be seen throughout all U.S. institutions: traditional media (television programming, film, music artists and videos, news specials for youth), social media (Facebook groups, Twitter, online communities and campaigns, YouTube), education (Gay/Straight Alliances, anti-bullying campaigns, anti-bias curricula, multicultural emphasis in literary instruction), and politics (end of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, the increased momentum for same-sex marriage rights, more and more public figures coming out of the closet). We are now, arguably, living within a society that openly lives out the mantra of Queer Rights Movements of the 1970’s: We’re here…we’re queer…get used to it. The potential of this shift is truly profound, yet often goes unrecognized or is strategically overlooked by many facets of society. However, queer youth are responding to this shift and educators, researchers, parents, policymakers, employers, and institutions now have tremendous opportunities to listen to and learn from these enactments and attempt to understand the complexities of the embodied and emplaced realities of queer youth across the U.S.
Statement of the Problem

One needs not look far in contemporary U.S. society to find examples of heteronormative, or even homophobic, ideologies being perpetuated onto the lives of queer individuals. Ideations of masculinity and femininity are deeply ensconced and reinforced in virtually every member of a society, to some degree. However, the progress and visibility that stems from the queer liberation movements of the 1960’s and 1970’s have truly changed, or at least complicated, the landscape of heteronormative ideologies in U.S. society. Today’s youth have more possibilities than ever to examine, complicate, accept, or reject the normative structures that govern their lives. Indeed, adults have profound opportunities to understand how youth are receiving these contradictory ideologies. But far too often, youth who critique, play with, or outright reject the hegemonic forces in their lives are immediately labeled deviant or deficient (Pullen, 2009; Seidman, 1996; Penn, 1995).

Despite the regulatory practices that attempt to govern and “normalize” the lives of queer youth—such as the perpetuation of gay reparative therapy agendas (Baxter, 2004) or legislative initiatives like the “Don’t Say Gay” bill proposed in Tennessee (Blumenfeld, 2011)—we can also discern a positive impetus in the pursuit of better exploring the everyday lived realities of queer youth and adults alike. Since the 1970’s, there has been much research and scholarship on the lives and identities of queer individuals and communities on a host of issues ranging from education, literature, health, public policy, activism, and geography. Indeed, much has been learned about the individual, social, psychological, and experiential complexities of queer life as a result of this research. While this legacy of scholarship does offer informative and necessary findings that influence how we all understand the intersecting issues that queer youth and adults
experience in their lives, I argue that much of this research has been misguided or, at the least, is not sufficient to adequately address the diversity of the everyday lived realities of queer youth.

Over the past several decades, we have undoubtedly witnessed the advent of scholarship that explores a host of issues that affect queer lives and bodies ranging from health, arts and literature, education, activism, and geopolitics. We also now have Queer Studies as a legitimate field of inquiry, replete with local/national/international conferences, publications, and forums to further explore the lives of queer identities. This groundwork is essential in the pursuit of documenting and exploring the everyday lived realities of queer people throughout the U.S. An example of this importance can be found in the research around HIV/AIDS. Without both quantitative and qualitative work around the intricacies of contracting, living with, or dying from HIV/AIDS, our society would certainly struggle to understand how all of our lives—regardless of sexual orientation—are affected by this disease.

I argue that while this work is certainly necessary, the majority of the framing around research on sexual minorities has far-too-often relied upon a deficit model that casts a wide net over all queer people. The more portrayals and narratives of queer life and culture in media and scholarship that continue to reproduce the “at-risk”, “dangerous” behaviors and lifestyles of gays and lesbians, the more the stereotype begins to become ingrained in society (for queers and non-queers alike). The majority of current research and scholarship on queer youth tends to focus on these “at-risk” categories: bullying, mental health, suicide, STD’s, homelessness, etc. These issues are unquestionably present in the lives of many contemporary queer youth in U.S. society and are extremely important in understanding the nuances of everyday life and the decision-making capacity of these young adults. However, I also believe that researchers have an ethical
obligation to further tease out how queer youth are receiving these messages in society, yet continuing to live out their lives as they see fit.

**Purpose of the Study**

The rise in scholarship on queer lives and bodies, along with an exponentially increasing visibility of the lives of queer men and women throughout every facet of society, create fertile ground, which warrants further exploration by researchers. Again, it is inherently necessary in this work to understand how living within a heteronormative society affects queer youth and adults, which ultimately includes how sexual minorities do face a level of scrutiny, shame, and stigma that manifests in a number of ways. However, as researchers, we must also turn our gaze to the endlessly productive ways in which queer youth are continuing to reject these negative implications and instead are forging their own paths in the world.

A critical factor that offers promise in this work is the continually shifting multicultural makeup of students in public schools across the U.S. More than half a century after the U.S. Supreme Court mandated that all public schools in the nation would be forced to integrate (with all deliberate speed), our nation still collectively struggles to fulfill the promises of this monumental shift in public policy. Public schools in the U.S. now have more diversity than at any other time in our nation’s history, including students across a wide spectrum: race, class, gender, nationality, ability, religion, and language. Yet, research continues to point out that schools are more segregated than ever, students are becoming more and more disconnected with school, and teachers and administrators are not engaging students in curricula and instruction that tap into students’ backgrounds, interests, or aspirations in a sufficient manner.

Connected to larger social movements, public education in the U.S. has reluctantly been forced over the past century to recognize and address the identities, needs, and contributions of
students that are enrolled in schools on a daily basis. The Civil Rights Movements, the Women’s Right’s Movements, the American Indian Movements, the Queer Rights Movements, Labor Movements, and the Chicano Movements, among others, have all historically influenced how public schools view and teach their student populations. However, research and experiences inform us that we still have much work to accomplish. Although we have had a push for inclusion of multicultural voices and contributions in public education for decades, how many students sitting in public school classrooms in 2014 would claim that their identities, needs, and contributions are being reflected in the curricula and instruction that they are engaging with on a daily basis? The fact is that all students deserve equitable access to a robust and relevant education that will help them achieve their goals in life. All students—regardless of difference—should enjoy the opportunity of public education in the U.S. without being impeded by stigmas that are unjust and unnecessary.

Admittedly, we now have more data and investigations into the lives of the diverse students who attend U.S. public schools than at any other time in our history. However, the framing around these investigations often focuses on the “at-risk” model or negative experiences students face in schools. Understanding these issues are certainly important endeavors to ensure that all students’ needs and identities are being addressed, but the result has been a focus that favors and manipulates for political purposes quantitative investigations of school climate, graduation and retention rates, bullying and harassment, and power structures at the local and national levels. Again, this work is necessary to address the centuries of inequity in U.S. public schools for marginalized groups. But what has been lost in this push is a space to critically and qualitatively investigate curricular and instructional decisions of educators and schools and the potential impact on marginalized students. Questions about what students learn and are exposed
to in schools, how they learn that information and knowledge in schools, and in what conditions these educational experiences take place in schools should matter deeply to educators and researchers. I feel ethically lead to ask critical questions about curriculum and instruction in relation to queer youth through this research study in the pursuit of better meeting the academic, social, and psychological needs of queer youth through secondary schools.

This work is undoubtedly controversial and highly contested across the U.S. I argue that the push for inclusion of queer content and contributions into K-12 curricula and instruction is more contentious than other areas of diversity, simply because policymakers and stakeholders traditionally equate sexual orientation and gender expression solely with sexual acts or moral indecency. Geographic location and political influence must also be taken into consideration in work with queer youth. In California, for example, the Fair, Accurate, Inclusive and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act now mandates the inclusion of queer content in public schools (Rosario, 2013). At the other end of the spectrum, eight states (Alabama, Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah) have laws or policies that explicitly prohibit the development or dissemination of curricula and instruction with queer content (Kosciw, Gretyak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, and Palmer, 2012). Compounded with these oppressive laws, many of these same states do not have hate crime legislation that protects queer or questioning individuals.

How do teachers in these states understand their role as educators to their students? How are curricular decisions being made across the U.S.? Although schools and educators have been taught that multicultural education must be included in our educational programming, does this mean that teachers have been incorporating texts, strategies, projects, and historical contributions from a diverse spectrum during this time? Most research and scholarship on this topic tend to
focus on teachers themselves or teacher educators. Little research has been conducted with marginalized student populations in the U.S. who directly experience the curricular and instructional choices of their teachers and schools. This dissertation seeks to explore whether or not queer college students had any interactions with queer content or contributions in their secondary school experiences and to what extent these interactions affected their academic, social, and psychological development. We have a lack of knowledge base about the impact access to academic and social support in secondary schools on queer topics has for queer or questioning youth (or for heteronormative youth). With a growing visibility of queer identities in U.S. society and more and more vocal queer youth, the opportunity is ripe to learn directly from them about their experiences on these topics and to listen to their recommendations for appropriately and adequately incorporating queer topics in middle and high schools.

The purpose of this research study was to focus on queer or questioning college students and learn what level of interaction they had with queer content or contributions in their middle and high school experiences, and to what benefit or harm. Additionally, the study sought to understand spaces and ways participants received information on queer topics during adolescence. This study directly incorporated recommendations queer participants had for educators and schools on how to better address representations, issues, programming, histories, and literacies of queer life in middle and high school settings. By creating a space for participants to actively reflect upon their exposure to queer content or representations in their secondary school experiences, this study gave voice to a predominately ignored or silenced population that deserves a stake in how issues of gender and sexual orientation are addressed in schools. The questions that guided this research project are:
1) How do queer college students feel that questions of sexual orientation and gender expression were addressed in their secondary school curricula?

2) Where did queer college students receive instruction and/or access queer content/contributions during their secondary school years?

3) How do participants understand their lives in relation to queer content and contributions that were available to them in their secondary school experiences?

4) What recommendations do queer college students have for secondary schools and curricular choices that might benefit queer or questioning students during their middle and high school years?

**Significance of the Study**

Young people growing up in contemporary U.S. society are experiencing a vastly changing and shifting social world in which to interact. We can trace these changes in institutional structures present in U.S. society, such as media, education, religion, and politics. On the one hand, these changes present extremely powerful opportunities for young people to more critically examine the world around them, while also considering how these messages impact their lives or identities. Alternatively, many of these changes offer contradictory messages to young people (and essentially society writ-large) about whose voices and stories matter, and whose are continually ignored or silenced. Young people growing up in today’s U.S. society can find more positive queer representations in media than at any other time in our collective history. We also see a shift in the acceptance of queer identities and rights in the political and cultural spheres and, to an extent, religious institutions (e.g. gaining of same sex marriage rights, openly queer politicians, athletes, and religious leaders). However, public
education remains reluctant to fully-embrace the queer identities of students, much less the
contributions of non-heterosexual individuals or groups within K-12 curricula.

These mixed messages certainly present contradictory, yet potentially illuminating
possibilities in the work that still needs to be undertaken in order for homophobia and
heterosexism to be eradicated. Research has proven that young people who do not fit into a
normative framework are more easily targeted as the subject of bullying, peer pressure, and
ostracism (Human Rights Campaign, 2012; Kosciw et al, 2012; Fedewa and Ahn, 2011). We
can unfortunately recognize the very real and tangible ways in which queer bodies are
endangered by living within a heteronormative and homophobic society—from bullying, to
suicide, to homelessness, to mental health issues. All of these statistics, narratives, and areas of
concern cannot be ignored or silenced by our society because these young people’s lives and
stories matter.

We also live in a time where queer identities are being recognized within traditional,
mainstream entities. Young people are coming out of the closet at earlier ages than ever before
(Rossi, 2010), while newer generations are more open to the twisting, playful reality of queer
life. The potential buying power of gays and lesbians has certainly been recognized by capitalist
enterprises and is actively being fought over by many corporations (Rigdon, 1991; Gudelunas,
2011). There are now “out” celebrities (entertainers, sports stars, politicians, artists, and authors)
that live-out a certain level of freedom in their personal and professional careers. The swell of
momentum behind the “It Gets Better” project offers a profound shift in the level of support and
acceptance of queer identities from a host of non-partisan contributors. Despite the continued
and persistent layers of oppression that living within a heteronormative society can produce, we
can now also look to the possibilities that exist for young people to critically examine the world
and themselves in today’s sociopolitical landscape and what role education might play in this process.

I have been pleasantly impressed with the level of academic discourse that has continued to flourish around issues for queer youth over the past two decades. These necessary statistics and narratives document the multiple ways in which living within a heteronormative, and often homophobic, society affects people’s lives and possibilities. For example, the continued research on school bullying for queer or questioning young people is exponentially crucial in the pursuit of rectifying the harmful effects of homophobia in public schools. We can also better understand how geographic location and governmental policies impact the lives of queer youth (and adults) through research and scholarship (Hatzenbuehler, M. L., 2011; Hatzenbuehler, M. L., Keyes, K. M., & Hasin, D. S., 2009). This research is tremendously needed and long overdue, but I feel that academic research can only go so far in the pursuit of creating an equitable, yet supportive spaces for all students in public institutions and out-of-school contexts.

What is also necessary in this pursuit occurs each and every day across the U.S.—how queer or questioning youth experience, understand, resist, and live out their lives truly matters. Because most institutions, including public schools, are reticent to enact fully-inclusive policies protecting and supporting a spectrum of gender and sexual orientation perspectives, combined with the staunch denial of queer content within the majority of public K-12 curricula, students who identify as queer or questioning have unique perspectives and experiences to offer our society to help us better understand how these lack of policies and support structures play out on a daily basis. As advocates for queer youth, we must begin to turn our gaze to traditionally unrecognized sites of enactment and begin to acknowledge how youth populations navigate their social environments. This work also challenges educators, researchers, and local communities to
ask more nuanced and complex questions about the meanings and understandings produced from these embodied and emplaced enactments by youth.

**Researcher Positionality**

As an openly queer researcher and educator, it was part of my responsibility to continually recognize and reflect upon my perspective I brought to this study and constantly be aware of my positioning and impact on the research project. Therefore, it is important to initially speak to my positioning as researcher in this study. I am a White, able-bodied, cisgender, queer man from an upper middle class upbringing, in my mid-30’s. Reflecting upon my childhood and adolescent years, I feel that I received a tremendous level of support and encouragement from my family and peers in all facets of my life. Growing up in a small, rural community in middle Tennessee afforded me a safe and nurturing place to explore my interests, assess and fine-tune my moral compass, and navigate my way into adulthood. I assuredly grew up in a literary household with my parents both avid readers and educators and, understandably, I had access to a plethora of reading materials throughout my entire life. By the time I left my hometown for college, I understood the importance I placed on the written word, knew very well that a strong sense of community and civic engagement guided my worldview, and believed wholeheartedly in the dignity and rights of all people. Yet, I was so far removed from understanding my own individual identity that I did not come out as a queer man until my last undergraduate semester of college.

Even with the supportive structures in my youth and adolescence and regardless of the fact that I ran around with the queer kids throughout elementary and secondary school, I still did not embrace the difference that I always knew was a part of my identity. I do not regret or bemoan the path that led me to be comfortable in my own skin in the world, although I
admittedly continue to ask myself “what if”…those “why didn’t I” questions. This is assuredly part of the complexities of living within a heteronormative society, arguably more deeply embedded within traditional communities in the U.S. South like my hometown. I could make myself frenetic wishing that I could have come out in my teenage years, that there was at least one positive mention of queer identities or contributions in my K-12 curricula, or that there was a sense of community for other men and women who also identified as queer in my hometown. But that is not my reality. I did not have others around me who openly identified as queer, did not have mentors or references of queer identities in my formalized K-12 schooling, and certainly did not have a community that supported, much less even mentioned, queer identities while growing up.

Instead of fostering resentment toward these lack of experiences or understandings of sexual minorities in my youth, I have grown to appreciate the supportive networks in my life that eventually led me to comfortably, and proudly, come out as a gay man. I have come to understand that this is simply my life trajectory—influencing both how I define myself in the world and how I live out my personal and professional life in adulthood. After pursuing education as a career and working diligently to address the inequities within educational structures for underrepresented groups, I can now contextualize that my upbringing—for better or worse—has highly influenced my motivation and drive to seek out spaces where members of minority groups are creating their own trajectories in the world. Indeed, the human spirit is powerful and those from stigmatized groups who do make it out of their youth do so via profound and endlessly creative means.

Throughout this research project, I always attempted to remain open to participants’ perspectives and experiences shared in interviews or focus groups. While I certainly have my
own biases and understandings in relation to the overarching research topic as a queer educational researcher, I also remained conscious that it was my part to listen and learn from participants’ recommendations and experiences with queer content in their secondary school experiences. Throughout the research study, I understood that inevitably I would both influence and be influenced by the experience (Ellingson, 1998). My very presence as an openly queer researcher conducting a qualitative inquiry with out college students influenced how participants viewed me and the research project itself. Part of my role as researcher was to knowledgeably engage with the influence I was having on the study and to remain transparent about that influence in my writing and analysis. Throughout data collection, analysis, and writing, I remained attuned to my presence and impact on the study in relation to my interactions with participants as they shared their broad and valuable range of stories, perspectives, and experiences with me.

This qualitative inquiry offers myself, and others, an opportunity to further tease out how and in what ways any interactions with queer content in our secondary school experiences would have potentially helped or hindered our development or sense of self. Additionally, it is my hope that this project will also contribute to future understandings about how best to address the needs of queer or questioning students in secondary schools throughout the U.S.

**Definitions**

Because a project of this nature consists of varying and highly contested ideas of gender, sex, identity, and societal conditions, it is important that I lay the groundwork for how I understand and use key terminology. As the project ensued, it was also necessary for me to add to this list of terminology and expand these definitions to take into consideration how
participants use and understand these terms. The following terms are critical to contextualize in the pursuit of the larger goals of the project:

- **Queer**—In a move to reclaim homophobic slang, activists and scholars began to use the term *queer* in the 1980’s to refer to any individual or group that does not conform to hegemonic ideals of biological sex, sexual orientation, or gender. This nonconformity stems from perceived or actual enactments by individuals or groups. For the purposes of this research project, I use the term *queer* to refer to individuals or groups who identify across a spectrum of identities or desires that fall outside of traditional, normative categories including: gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, intersex, transgender, demisexual, and/or any individual questioning their place within this spectrum.

- **The closet** is a metaphorical concept that encapsulates living a life that possesses secrets that must be maintained in order to survive in one’s present conditions. For queer individuals, *the closet* represents a contentious metaphor—some need *the closet* to function in their daily lives while others ridicule those who still adhere to the confines of this secretive construct. Regardless, *the closet* is a reality for most, if not all, queer individuals and is one of the foundational stimuli for recognizing one’s sexual identity within a heteronormative society (Sedgwick, 1990). *The closet* also imposes a level of recognition on the part of others—one must negotiate this construct with the consent and understanding of others in order to be in *the closet*.

- **Coming out** refers to the ongoing and perpetual disclosure of one’s identity to self and others. Traditionally, *coming out* specifically speaks to the admission of a queer individual’s understanding of their same-sex attraction to others. Tantamount in the
coming out process is the understanding that others will not force, coerce, or judge others in this work; it is always up to an individual to disclose one’s identity to others.

- **Homophobia**—Personal or institutional resistance toward individuals or groups who reject normative ideals of sex and gender. *Homophobia* stems from irrational fears, stereotypes, institutional teachings, and false notions, to name but a few instigators, and can manifest itself in the following ways: prejudice, hatred, avoidance, discomfort, harassment, discrimination, and/or violence. Although *homophobia* traditionally refers to individuals or groups who live within a heteronormative framework, internalized *homophobia* (self-hatred of queer individuals or behavior) is also a consequence of living under oppressive institutions.

- **Heterosexism** occurs when individuals or groups automatically assume a heterosexual orientation to the world. Under this paradigm, heterosexuality becomes the norm (the natural…the preferred) and is viewed and accepted as superior to other ways of being. *Heterosexism* works both on individual levels (those who do not adhere to heterosexual performances, beliefs, or practices are labeled deviant or deficient) as well as institutional levels (discriminatory policies, laws, and practices that do not value or create equitable conditions for individuals or groups who fall outside a heterosexual orientation).

- **Heteronormative**—Extending from the idea of heterosexism, *heteronormativity* is “the assumption or expectation that everyone is heterosexual, and the corollary to this assumption is that it is normal to be heterosexual and not necessarily normal to be anything else” (Biegel, 2010, p.136). *Heteronormativity* moves beyond traditional ideas of sexual orientation and assumes normative practices and ideations of gender and performativity. From an institutional standpoint, *heteronormativity* becomes the natural
(and thus ideal) notion for what is recognized, taught, disseminated, and valued within a society.

- **Intersectionality** represents the nexus of multiple identity characteristics that impact an individual’s life. *Intersectionality* attempts to untangle unifying or binary ideas of identity and seeks to explore how multiple dimensions of one’s life affects one’s options or understandings of their situated selves (Crenshaw, 1989).

- **Transgender (or trans*)** are constantly evolving and debated terms, but I understand and use them interchangeably in reference to individuals whose gender identity does not align with their physical or biological sex or individuals who challenge gender norms through their behavior, presentation, or performance (Meem, Gibson, & Alexander, 2010)

- **Cisgender** is used to describe an individual whose assigned (biological) sex is in alignment with one’s gender identity and expression. Cisgender is a separate identity category from sexual orientation.

- **Demisexual** describes an individual who does not experience sexual attraction based on physical characteristics and/or gender, but may develop sexual attractions based on emotional or mental connections with others.

- **Panromantic**—A term used in the queer community to describe someone who can be romantically attracted to people irrespective of their sex and/or gender, but has no sexual interest in others (also associated with the term *asexual*).

- **Genderqueer** is a newer term used in the queer community describing a spectrum of individuals who do not self-identify as solely male or female, who claim to have no gender, or who refuse gender categorization (Harrison, Grant, & Herman, 2011-2012)
Organization of the Study

This dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter I has provided an overview of the purposes and rationale for conducting the study, contextualizes the significance of the study, offers pertinent definitions, and includes the guiding research questions. Chapter II explores the theoretical and conceptual frameworks and methodological implications that guided the study and touches upon: queer theory and contemporary youth culture, embodiment, multicultural education, and queer young adult literature and literacies. Chapter III outlines a methodology for a qualitative research design that incorporates qualitative, phenomenological methods to better understand how queer college students interacted with queer content in their secondary school experiences. Chapter IV provides analysis of the data collected throughout the study and offers findings that stem from the research agenda. Finally, Chapter V revisits the guiding research questions, contextualizes any potential limitations, discusses implications of the findings for future research and practice, and offers final conclusions.
CHAPTER II:
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

This chapter presents a review of literature as a means of situating the proposed project within the larger contexts of current research and enactments of queer youth. Several overarching areas of inquiry are important to the issues explored throughout this study: queer theory; contemporary queer youth cultures; embodiment; multicultural education; and queer young adult literature and literacies. A synthesis of the critical components of these areas of inquiry and connections commonalities central to the guiding purposes of this research project is provided in this chapter. Finally, a brief discussion of how these areas have been explored methodologically is included with a discussion of previous research studies on this phenomenon that impacted the understanding and development of this study.

Queer Theory

Usage and understanding of the term queer have certainly evolved in U.S. contexts over the past century. Moving from a position of derogatory slang to a reclamation of the term as a positive embrace of one’s orientation to the world, queer now possesses multiple meanings and is theoretically debated among scholars across disciplines. Although queer theory is a constantly evolving theoretical perspective that seeks to explore and deconstruct a static categorization of identity as it relates to gender and sexuality, its roots stem from a poststructural critique of a unified self and socially constructed understandings of sexuality (Gamson, 2000). One of the major tools of queer theory is deconstruction, which seeks to take apart language and rhetorical
devices and reassemble them with different results. Through this process, one is able to understand how sexual categories and identities are constructed within a society, how these constructions are received by members of a society, who benefits (and who is subjugated) through this process, and for what purposes (Butler, 1993; Pinar, 1998; Capper, 1999).

However, queer has come to mean more than a signifier of one’s actual or perceived identity. I am aligned with the claim of literary and cultural studies scholar Deborah Carlin (2011), as she states, “The term ‘queer’ is frequently misunderstood to function as either a noun or as an identity category; however, it should more accurately be deployed as a verb (to queer), one that signifies action rather than individuals” (p. 56). Eve Sedgwick, often viewed as one of the originators of queer theory, reminds us that “Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, troublant. The word ‘queer’ itself means across—it comes from the Indo-European root -twerkw, which also yields the German quer (transverse), Latin torquere (to twist), English athwart” (Sedgwick, 1993, xiii). We can take from this understanding that to be or to act queer is neither static nor in opposition to a binary other…it cuts across and is constantly in motion in relation to context (temporal and spatial).

Living within a society that consistently, automatically categorizes and regulates individuals’ lives, queer enactments are contradictory to what is being disseminated from traditional institutions and broader culture. Grace, Hill, Johnson, and Lewis (2004) challenge these categories and classifications by claiming that:

Queer is a shifting and changing way of knowing the world and being in it. There is a push-and-pull to queer since it simultaneously depends on and at the same time rejects fixed identities, subjectivities, and communities. It disrupts identity claims, positioning identity as inadequate for describing what it claims to embody. Queer tells U/s that
identity is a construction that traps, blocks, stifles, retards—therefore queer refuses terms of identity. Queer attempts to reconstruct subjectivities wary of the limitations of identity politics. Queer is most provocative when it is shifting, tentative, ambiguous, and uncertain. (p. 303)

Indeed, entities (people, ideas, pedagogies, texts, etc.) that are labeled or projected to be queer can be perceived as provocative and oftentimes are so visibly different from the norm that they are quickly deemed abnormal, defiant, or deviant within a traditionally heteronormative society or space. But one of the exiting possibilities in this work is the continually shifting nature of queer politics that refuses static classification or reproducing the status quo. Therefore, from queer theory, we can understand that we must look beyond traditional understandings of identity when attempting to learn how individuals embody their everyday lived experiences. Arguably, one of the most visible spaces we can better understand this interplay is by learning from the everyday lived experiences of queer youth and how they are receiving, interpreting, twisting, and living out their lives.

**Contemporary Queer Youth Cultures**

Looking out at the landscape of American culture, we can discern the material realities and disparate ways in which young people are living out their lives. Particularly for queer youth, we can not overlook the obstacles, challenges, and consequences of living within traditionally heteronormative institutions and societies. From research and news accounts of queer youth, the nation is now more aware of the prevalence of bullying, suicide rates, young people being pushed out of their homes and schools, drug and alcohol abuse, and lack of institutional support structures for youth seeking out guidance and protection. Indeed, these factors must always be taken into consideration when addressing research or projects that involve youth. However,
what is often overlooked or silenced are the ways in which youth populations are rejecting or manipulating messages of how to be in the world and, in essence, rejecting the status quo. Susan Driver, in her introduction to a seminal text on this topic, *Queer Youth Cultures* (2008), states that:

> Queer youth cultures defy narrow definitions and open up new ways of understanding and imagining what it means to be a youth today. Queer youth challenge us to rethink the very status of gender, generation, sexuality, and culture, and they push us to become nuanced in the ways we read, watch, and listen to young people telling their own stories and envisioning their futures (p. 1).

I am aligned with Driver’s claim that adults who work with or know young people must begin to read, watch, and listen more closely and in more nuanced ways in order to discern the meanings behind their actions and embodiments. Part of the work in this process is an understanding of how queer youth are receiving normative frameworks in their lives and yet still manage to resist these regulating constructs and create new ways of being in the world.

Indeed, these enactments are already happening all around us as queer youth interact with the world around them…in public schools, in afterschool youth activities, in consumer culture, in online spaces. From a K-12 educational aspect, youth are beginning to have more opportunities to speak up and out against the barriers they face in their lives. Although it is still difficult in many communities, we can now see a push for more Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in secondary schools. It is noteworthy that the first GSA was founded by secondary students of color in 1972 at New York City’s George Washington High School in the Bronx (Johnson, 2007), thus opening the doors for future students to take initiative to start similar clubs across U.S. schools. In 2014, over forty years after this student-initiated movement began, there are
over 4,000 registered GSAs in the U.S.—in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and many military bases (GLSEN.org). GSAs are significant, not only because they provide youth (both in secondary schools and at the collegiate level) a space to have their stories told and advocate for their rights, but also because they give young adults leadership opportunities through local meetings and national conferences (Renn & Bilodau, 2005; Renn, 2007).

Within secondary schooling, we can also discern a more public push for inclusion of same-sex couples at school-sponsored events, such as prom, as well as campaigns for queering of school dress codes and self-selected representations of queer students in yearbook photos. With the increased understanding about the everyday lived realities of trans* individuals, we also can begin to see public schools taking initial steps to include these students in all aspects of their educational programming. It is worth noting that many of these advances happen because youth themselves, supportive parents/guardians, or advocacy organizations are making the push for their inclusion—often against strong obstruction. Lawmakers, institutions, and the personnel of K-12 schooling often are the most hesitant to fully embrace queer student populations. But, queer youth themselves are teaching us about what it means to live out your truth and how to fight for your rights on a daily basis across the U.S and educators, administrators, policymakers, and researchers must begin to listen to what they are teaching us.

Queer youth are also challenging us to learn from their everyday lived experiences beyond school contexts. Many queer young adults are embodying the tenets of queer theory and are self-selecting the language, naming practices, and/or pronouns they want others in their lives to use when referring to them. The term “genderqueer” has recently been taken up by queer young adults to describe identifying with both masculine and feminine perspectives, and makes space for a fluidity to move back and forth between the two constructions of gender (Corwin,
Other examples of queer young adults playing with the language and naming practices around gender and sexuality include using pronouns such as “hir” or “zhe”. In a study on trans* zine writers, Jackie Regales (2009) cites a participant who speaks to the interplay of perspectives that youth are enacting around gender and sexuality:

Because I’ve concluded that my identity is fluid as fuck. Sometimes I feel like a femme fag, sometimes like a butch dyke, sometimes like a cocky teenage boy, sometimes like a girly girl. And those are only the binaries I inhabit, there are so many more feelings I can’t yet articulate. (p. 88)

What is significant about these enactments by queer youth is the exchangeability and twisting approach to identity work that they are living out. We can learn from how they are receiving, rejecting, and manipulating static ideas of gender or sexuality binaries and are creating something new...something fluid and something that still creates a space for shifting back and forth along the spectrum (that cannot yet be articulated).

We must listen to and learn from the everyday lived experiences of queer youth and how they are navigating their lives. Research shows that an estimated 26% of youth who come out to family members risk being thrown out of their homes and/or being disowned, while a disproportionate number of homeless youth are transgender (Vaccaro, August, & Kennedy 2012). Research and initiatives have also been conducted with queer youth populations who lack familial support and face increased rates of attempted suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, and sex work (compared to youth who do have familial support). However, little research exists documenting the endlessly creative ways in which queer youth who have been thrown out of their homes do manage to survive. Many queer youth who do not have support at home (or have been outright removed from their homes) find refuge and support with friends, shelters, non-
profit organizations. Terms typically applied to the phenomenon of queer people purposely redefining the support networks in their lives include: chosen family, intentional family, and family of choice (Weston, 1991; Oswald, 2002; Muraco, 2006). We also now see queer youth—male and female, as drag queens and drag kings—finding chosen family with drag collectives throughout the country.

Additionally, we can identify more spaces for queer youth to become full participants in the struggle to have their voices heard and the issues they face in their everyday lived experiences publically addressed. Because queer youth represent the nexus of marginalized groups in the U.S., society at large is often reluctant to look to or explore these enactments. But research and news accounts of queer youth actively speaking out against oppression they are experiencing in their lives continue to flourish in the U.S. (and across the globe). Jennifer Schindel (2008) speaks to this in her research with a community organization for queer youth as she writes, “Many youth becoming involved in the growing GSA movement are doing so by traversing boundaries of formal and informal education and expanding the scope of activism and education alike…moving in and out of school spaces” (p. 59). Queer youth themselves are networking with one another and creating these spaces themselves to advocate for their rights from a policy standpoint, develop and implement educational campaigns to teach their communities about their everyday lived experiences and barriers they face to equality, and create supportive and sustainable strategies to have their voices heard.

Part of this work follows traditional strategies of movement building, but queer youth are also demonstrating new ways of enacting identity politics in public spaces and discourse. In research on a group of queer youth of color whose activist work takes the form of performative dance, Grady, Marquez, & McLaren (2012) found that “the group sees dance as an embodiment
of emotions and ideas used to tell a story (a story of overcoming the pain and persecution many queer youth of color face only to emerge victorious, renewed and strengthened)” (p. 995). Through their performative storytelling about the experiences they face as a group of queer youth of color, the dance troupe has been able to accrue some financial stability, which they, in turn, used to establish group homes for queer youth of color who have been pushed out of their homes because of their sexuality. Indeed, this group:

Is at the forefront of showing and educating the world of the often lived and shared experiences of queer individuals of color through performance. In turn, their dance represents a culture of: celebration, community, creativity, competition, education, freedom, and unity. (Grady et al., 2012, p. 995)

Whether queer youth are conducting educational campaigns, targeting specific policies in their communities, using performance as a means to speak to their situated realities, or incorporating anarchist principles in their strategies of engagement (Ritchie, 2008), we, as a society, must be attuned to these enactments and receive the messages that youth are putting on display across the country.

From these enactments of queer youth, we can discern that young people growing up in the U.S. today are very much attuned to the heteronormative frameworks that govern and regulate their lives. Not only must queer youth navigate the cultural, social, political, and familial messages they receive by living out a non-normative life, but they also must make important decisions about how to move forward each day. From activism to online spaces to literacy, queer youth are continually reinterpreting and twisting the messages they receive in their lives and are creating new spaces and ways of being.
**Embodiment**

Individuals working with young adults (particularly in educational settings) must think and work through a host of intersecting issues because of the number and diversity of youth that participate in schooling and youth activities on a daily basis. One of the most crucial, yet overlooked, layers present within educational settings is the embodiment of the individuals embedded in that space. Whether addressing teachers, administrators, students, or support staff, an educational research project that seeks to explore a social justice agenda must take into consideration a more nuanced understanding of how participants are positioned within that space and pay attention to who is seen and who is overlooked. Cherland and Harper (2007) write that:

> The body has always been of key importance for those whose teaching and research is explicitly embedded in advocacy agendas and in social justice issues more generally. At the heart of advocacy work has been questions and challenges concerning which bodies are and are not present in public schooling, how bodies are named and produced in schools, and how hierarchies of bodies are organized and subjugated by social class, race, ethnicity, gender, and other forms of social difference. (p. 229)

For a research study that seeks to explore how queer youth live out their lives and make sense of their situated perspectives and opportunities, it is crucial to understand how queer bodies are identified and produced in educational settings. As we begin to see more queer youth coming out at earlier ages, challenging the heteronormative structures and rules that are in play in most educational settings, and generally live out their lives in ways that make those around them recognize their embodied situatedness, we now have more opportunities than ever to listen to and learn from these experiences.
We must also be attuned to how these individuals are working under, yet still resisting the power structures that undergird their everyday lives. Wanda Pillow (2000) speaks to this as she claims that:

The body has gained both attention and importance, not only in feminist and postmodern theories but also more broadly in social theory as a place from which to theorize, analyze, practice, and critically reconsider the construction and reproduction of knowledge, power, class, and culture (p. 199).

This notion is particularly salient in the exploration of how queer youth navigate their identities amongst the binding structures around them, especially in a public K-12 school setting. Twenty years ago, there was more of an unspoken push for queer youth to “stay in the closet” or to fall into traditional heteronormative roles in order to simply survive public school. Today, we continue to see accounts of queer youth living out their lives openly and demanding equal access to human rights. As educators and researchers, we have a responsibility to be attuned to issues extending from embodiment and emplacement for our students and participants. We must be a part of the “project of re/covering the importance of the body as a field of political and cultural activity [that] has been underway…bodies are now fashionable topics in a range of disciplines from media and cultural studies to sociology and philosophy” (McWilliam, 1996). Indeed, there is much that the educational community can learn about the embodied performances being enacted by queer youth on a daily basis—whether they are seen or overlooked by a traditional view.

The ways and enunciations of how queer youth are living out their lives in contemporary U.S. educational systems reveal much about where we are as a society. While we continue to hear harrowing accounts of homophobic bullying and policies that seek to silence any deviancy
within the White, heteronormative, patriarchal governing structures, we also find more and more positive examples of queer youth speaking out about their everyday lived experiences, resisting oppressions, and standing up for their rights. Elizabeth Grosz (1994) speaks to this embodied dualism as she writes:

> It is not simply that the body is represented in a variety of ways according to historical, social, and cultural exigencies while it remains basically the same; these factors actively produce the body as a body of a determinate type…[BUT] bodies are not inert; they function interactively and productively. They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable. It is the ability of bodies to always extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them, to seep beyond their domains of control (p. x-xi).

Indeed, queer youth in U.S. contexts know all too well the governing structures and social belief systems around them—that they must conform or risk the dangerous route of deviancy. But within this confining, reproductive framework, we also see endlessly productive bodies changing this script—to seep beyond the governing structures that enforce how they live out their lives on a daily basis. What do we make of these seepages? How do we understand a same-sex couple at a high school prom? What do we make of the reactions to this within the school/community? How do we understand a transgender elementary student…a middle school male student with eyeliner…a gay/straight alliance in a rural school community?

In 2014, we can identify many factors that laid the foundation for creating spaces where queer youth can openly express themselves and resist the confining heteronormative ideologies that govern most of our institutions in the U.S. It is up to the adults in educational contexts to look to and listen from these sites of productivity from these youth populations. Particularly for queer youth who struggle to navigate their understandings of identity during adolescence due to
societal oppression, we must be even more attuned to the nuanced needs and struggles they continue to face on a daily basis. Shapiro and Shapiro (2002) write about this process within identity work under our contemporary conditions:

In this postmodern world essentiality and permanence in identity and lifestyle strategies give way to fluidity and contingency as our life-world is interrogated for its capacity to provide meaning, recognition, pleasure, and opportunity … Individuals can no longer rest content with an identity that is simply handed down, inherited, or built on tradition. A person’s identity has, in large part, to be discovered, constructed, and actively sustained…[the body] has become central to the process by which a person’s identity is to be managed and constructed. It is the visible carrier of self-identity and is increasingly integrated into our life-world decisions and choices. It is thus an increasing focus for liberation politics. (p. 6)

What this means for those of us within the educational community—whether teachers, administrators, policymakers, or researchers—is an increased demand to listen to and learn from our students on all levels. For those of us working to create equitable, invigorating, and supportive environments for students, we have an obligation to shift our gaze to how our young people are situated within the educational setting…to try to understand what their embodied and emplaced everyday lives are attempting to speak to those of us in positions of authority. In essence, we now have a “focus in this new scholarship [which] suggests that more complex questions and issues also need to be addressed” (Cherland and Harper, 2007, p. 233).

**Multicultural Education**

As previously noted, educators across the U.S. have been taught for more than three decades that the incorporation of a multicultural framework for education must be undertaken to
meet the needs to our constantly changing student populations. Connected to social movements of the twentieth century, public schools have slowly made progress in the incorporation of the experiences of many marginalized groups within traditional curricula, including African American, Latino/a, and Asian American content and contributions. Despite decades of research, scholarship, teacher educator trainings, and the explosion of materials that center around the experiences of queer identities, the majority of public schools in the U.S. are still resistant to incorporate anything queer into the traditional curriculum.

To understand the lack of urgency in the incorporation of queer content in secondary schools, we must look to historical rationales as they have arisen. We are now in a data-driven educational momentum in U.S. public schools that increasingly relies on test scores to measure student achievement. A result of this is an emphasis on reading, writing, and mathematics (which are measured on yearly assessments), at the loss of social studies, humanities, science, and the arts (which are not measured). Many schools and individual teachers also cite religious beliefs or moral imperatives as a rationale for not including queer content in curricular or pedagogical decisions. Additionally, many educators claim that the incorporation of queer content (including discussion of authors’/scientists’/historical figures’ private lives) in secondary schools would lead to dangerous experimentation or is inappropriate for a school setting (Biegel, 2010).

Regardless of the slow pace which public education has implemented the incorporation of queer content into secondary school curricula and pedagogy, scholarship continually points to the transformative potential that would occur in this process. Stuart Biegel (2010) writes:

Key arguments supporting the introduction of LGBT content into the curriculum include the benefits that can accrue from both a self-esteem and a school climate perspective, as
well as the fact that LGBT issues arise in our society on a daily basis…In addition, gay-related historical and literary developments often fit well within state-adopted curricular content standards, and the inclusion of such material is consistent with the principle that schooling is most effective when it addresses the world as it currently exists (p. 140).

In addition to the benefits for queer or questioning students that arise when a robust, multicultural curriculum is incorporated in secondary schools, there are implications in this framework for all students. Lipkin (2004) writes that, “the humanistic reason for teaching students about homosexuality is to increase understanding of diversity, to lessen antigay bigotry, and to foster the healthy development of all youth” (p. 195, emphasis mine). Again, this work is not solely about isolating or individualizing queer experiences in schools, but rather opening up students’ understanding about the world around them so that they may make more critically informed decisions about their lives and potential in the world.

In this vein, the push for multicultural education over the past several decades has received some productive critique in the misguided attempts to “include” or “add-on” identity categories. Kumashiro (2002) speaks to this as he writes: “It is a problem, then, to speak of identities always and only in their separate(d) incarnations, which not only denies ways in which identities are already intersected, but more importantly masks ways in which certain identities are already privileged” (p. 56). The reality is that queer content and contributions have had a presence in the American literary tradition since the writings of the early colonists (Cavitch, 2011). Part of the work of multicultural education must be the recovery and inclusion of these texts and contributions in secondary schools, but also must extend beyond the normative framing that continues to bind secondary curricula. Similarly to the traditional canon in literature that continues to privilege the White, male perspective, it is not enough in multicultural education to
include a short story from a White, gay male without bringing in a critique of the larger hegemonic structures that undergird heterosexism and/or homophobia in the process. In essence, it takes more than a curricular recognition that queer people exist in the world in order to understand the intersecting issues in one’s life and how heterosexism and homophobia affect us all.

Activist and feminist scholar Barbara Smith notes in her essay “Homophobia, Why Bring It Up?” that “homophobia is usually the last oppression to be mentioned, the last to be taken seriously, the last to go. But it is extremely serious, sometimes to the point of being fatal” (1999, p. 112). She continues:

Curriculum that focuses in a positive way upon issues of sexual identity, sexuality, and sexism is still rare…yet schools are virtual cauldrons of homophobic sentiment, as witnessed by everything from the graffiti in the bathrooms and the putdowns yelled on the playground to the heterosexist bias of most texts and the firing of teachers on no other basis than that they are not heterosexual. (p. 114)

Research and news reports continue to remind us the horrific outcomes of oppression, prejudice, and homophobia that permeate the lives of marginalized groups. But placing the onus back on marginalized populations to deal with on their own or stumble their way through is a misguided and dangerous path forward. We are all implicated in this work, as Colleary (1999) states: “As long as schools and curricula fail to engage proactively with the realities of homosexuality and homophobia, we shall continue to see all students diminished in their understandings of history, culture, and democracy” (p. 152, emphasis mine). Educators and school systems need curricula and pedagogy that “unmasks heteronormativity,” according to Yescavange and Alexander (1997) and challenges all students to understand and critically analyze about “how their own
sexuality is socially constructed” (p. 3). Thus the learning opportunities and potential shifts the onus back to all participants in the classroom.

The benefits of a critical, strategic multicultural approach to education extend to all school students and to society writ-large. By incorporating a true reflection of historically diverse literature and contributions in formalized curricula, more and more students will have opportunities to engage with stories, experiences, texts, and faces that reflect their own identities and cultures. Through critical engagement and dialogic pedagogy, all students can benefit from the exploration of these diverse narratives and the larger social implications at play. In addition, the stories and perspectives that come out through a multicultural approach to education are directly correlated to real world issues that students are experiencing on a daily basis, which makes this push even more relevant in the lives of students. Finally, all of the strategies, texts, pedagogical decisions, and outcomes of multicultural education can be tied to required state (or national) standards. Although multicultural education can (and should) be incorporated across the disciplines, secondary school educators have tremendous potential to create spaces and opportunities for students to tap into broader issues of identity, intersectionality, power and privilege, and oppression and prejudice through literature and English/Language Arts classrooms.

**Literary Connections**

Extending from this notion of attuning our gaze to how queer youth are enacting their identities and lives each and every day, we also have an obligation to actively work to create more spaces and opportunities for queer youth to conduct this negotiation openly and supportively. While the range of intersecting issues affecting queer youth varies according to many factors (including levels of home and local support, available resources, policies, etc.), a
common thread that connects all youth is literacy (particularly stories about youth themselves). In his seminal text connecting the social and neurological implications of literature and literacy, Joseph Gold (2002) claims that:

The role of literature in human biology is to foster diversity, build reader identity, support balance, nurture adaptation, and assist survival. Our human power resides in language and the productions of language…Stories are found everywhere in the world and form the basis of a culture, its beliefs, value, and wisdom. (p. 1)

I am aligned with Gold’s claim that literature, literacy, and language possess more power than mere skills to be gained and mastered in a classroom. Language and stories are about connecting ourselves with others within the larger context of culture. They help us (as readers) understand and contextualize our stories with those of others and through that process, help us navigate ourselves through life’s decisions and possibilities (going back to Gold’s claim of balance…adaptation…survival).

As an English/literacy educator and researcher, I have seen the powerful potential of literature and stories to help readers survive (myself and my students included). Without reading certain stories or narratives, I know that I would have felt alone or isolated in situated contexts. Connecting with others like myself through literature, learning about other cultures and ways of being, and instilling my identity as a reader (and as a gay man) have all been tangible realities of my experiences with literature and stories. Particularly for groups who have been traditionally silenced and relegated to the margins of society, literature offers a compelling tool to offer individuals to help connect them to a larger sense of culture or belonging. Machado (2011) reminds us of this interplay with identity and literature as she claims:
That’s where a good story, well told, can bring characters alive, in situations that make it possible for different worlds to meet. That’s where literature is needed—the art of words, able to express ambivalences and alternative experiences, able to move, to touch one’s heart, or to give pangs and thrills, by the mere use of language—an everyday resource—in surprising ways, through an aesthetic approach to words and clauses. (p. 398)

For a research project of this nature, it is important to explore and try to better understand how queer youth are receiving and understanding the experiences and stories that are available to them in their everyday life through literature and the written word.

**Young Adult Literature**

Young adult literature (YAL) constitutes a relatively new genre (dating back to the 1960’s) and has subsequently flourished with titles, subgenres, themes, authors of all variety, and scope since its inception, particularly over the past two decades. YAL predominately deals with issues that are relevant to the lives of adolescents and almost always focuses on a teen protagonist or characters. There are many cognitive and emotional processes at work when adolescents read YAL, which emerging brain-based research is identifying in the development of adolescents and connections to literacy (see Solms and Turnbull, 2002; Iser, 1978; Bruner, 2002). Part of what occurs when adolescents read YAL is a deep connection to either part or all of the plot, the characters, the conflicts, the themes, the choices, the consequences—all of the elements that authors have presented to the adolescent reader. If part of the goal of education is to nurture the student to help him/her better understand themselves and their positioning and potential in the world around them, then YAL offers much promise to use as a meditational tool to help achieve these objectives. At a time when individuals are struggling to understand the world around them and their own identities and membership in this expanding landscape, YAL
presents itself as a viable and critical tool to help adolescents explore their perspectives, choices, conflicts, and consequences in ways that potentially have relevance and meaning in their lives.

As educators, we have many goals we are attempting to incorporate with our students. Alsup (2010) summarizes some of the larger intentions of English teachers specifically as she writes:

Many contemporary English teachers believe that education is more than the accumulation of facts and discrete bits of knowledge. It is also about the growth and development of human psyches that are thoughtful, empathetic, and open-minded, in addition to intelligent…Teaching literature is about teaching their students to become better human beings. Therefore, reading literature suddenly becomes a very personal act—perhaps even a type of therapeutic experience (i.e., bibliotherapy), as readers come to terms with developmental problems and challenges through vicarious experience of trials and tribulations of teen protagonists. (p. 7)

While these views do not represent the perspectives of all English and reading teachers in secondary schools, I find much truth in this overview. As curriculum is becoming more standardized and new generations of students are becoming more disconnected, entitled, and generally unhappy, I find the use of YAL promising in helping to address the needs of today’s adolescents. Alsup (2010) claims that teachers use YAL because “they believe their teenage students can relate to the characters and situations and hence will be more interested in the books and become more engaged readers—readers who react emotionally to books and who allow books to affect them” (p. 9). Readers benefit from this process because they can “both experience the narrative world and step back from it, setting it in the context of their own lives, other reading they have done, and other knowledge they have obtained” (p. 9). Alsup also points
out that “identifying or relating to a character involves a mental and emotional grappling with what the character represents—an ongoing interaction between the reader’s lived experience and the narrative with which he or she is engaging” (p. 10). As youth grapple with the world around them and attempt to understand their place within this social landscape, literature written for and about them offers tremendous potential to help in this process—what Sumara (1996) calls a “re-weaving of the reader’s self that alters the reader’s interactions with the world” (p. 80). This research project attempts to learn from queer participants and their experiences with queer content and contributions in their adolescent years in order to better understand how they are negotiating and reweaving their identities and how this interplay affects their interactions with the world around them.

**Literature for Queer Young Adults**

Many scholars recognize the mid-1960’s as the birth of YAL as a distinct classification of literary text for adolescents, often naming S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* and Robert Lipsyte’s *The Contender* (both published in 1967) as the first modern young adult novels (Poe, Samuels, & Carter, 1995). Coinciding with tensions in the national climate of the U.S., we also can identify the advent of the YA “problem novel” during this time period—dealing with social issues in a contemporary setting—through titles such as Ann Head’s *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* or Paul Zindel’s *The Pigman* (both published in 1968) (Cart, 2001; Campbell, 2003). Homosexuality and the social prejudices that constrained queer individuals were timely themes that eventually were addressed through the “problem novel” subgenre of YAL (Jenkins, 2011). While there had previously been authors and texts that touched upon issues of homosexuality in literature (James Baldwin, Virginia Woolf, Christopher Isherwood, Gertrude Stein, Gore Vidal, and Vin Packer—pseudonym for YAL author M. E. Kerr—to name a few), it was not until John Donovan’s 1969
title *I’ll Get There…It Better Be Worth the Trip* that we find a text written about and for adolescents that directly contains homosexual content (Day, 2000). 1969 is considered a watershed year in the Queer Rights Movement, as the Stonewall Riot occurred in June of this year in New York City.

Although many constrictions limited the scope of homosexual content in literature during this time period (such as pressures from the publishing industry, religious organizations, educational institutions), Donovan’s 1969 text marks a significant shift in the history of YAL by ushering in a space for queer content in literature written for adolescents. In the years following the publication of *I’ll Get There…*, we can identify a slow, yet steady increase in the number of YAL titles published in the U.S. that contain queer content and/or characters—averaging about one title a year in the 1970’s, four titles a year in the 1980’s, seven titles a year in the 1990’s, and twelve or more published a year in the early 21st century (Cart & Jenkins, 2006). From 2000 to today, we can clearly see an explosion in the titles and diversity of YAL that contain a spectrum of issues, perspectives, and content for queer adolescents (Dresang, 1999; Aronson, 2001; Cart, 2004).

Literature published in the early years of queer YAL often relied upon simplistic representations of queer life/issues such as the coming-out narrative (often serving as the text’s main source of conflict) or a queer character disrupting the heteronormative setting in the text (Myracle, 1998). Other queer characters during this time period were relegated to a mental institution or died in a fiery car accident—thus indicating the heteronormative positioning of the society. At the very least, early YAL that contained queer content often relied upon stereotypic depictions of the miserable conditions of the exotic Other—usually focusing on the White, gay male perspective (Cart & Jenkins, 2006). Although we can identify an increase in publishing
YAL with queer content during the 1970’s and 1980’s—notably including texts about lesbian experiences (Nancy Garden’s *Annie on My Mind*, 1982), queer characters of color (Rosa Guy’s *Ruby*, 1976), and queer family members (Norma Klein’s *Breaking Up*, 1980)—we can also find a proliferation of stereotypes and misunderstandings of queer life that is reflective of the socio-political conditions during these years. Often, queer characters in YAL during this time period (and still seen today) “just happen to be gay in the same way that someone just happens to be left-handed or have red hair” (Cart & Jenkins, 2006, p. xx). Homosexuality in YAL was also not typically depicted as encompassing complex, intersecting issues of identity, but rather was portrayed solely as a sexual act. If we do find an individualized depiction of a queer character during this time period, we can typically find stereotypic contexts—such as queer secondary characters who are distanced from the protagonist or the inevitable correlation of gay males and HIV/AIDS (Jenkins, 2011).

By the 1990’s, more authors and publishers began producing YAL with queer content—expanding beyond fiction to include more nonfiction, graphic novels and Manga, and texts about straight allies (Greyson, 2007; Brenner, 2008). Although many of the YAL titles with queer content during these years portrayed rigid boundaries between males and females (i.e., a text was either about a gay male or a lesbian female—and never the two shall meet), we can also begin to identify distinct queer communities emerge in these texts during this time period. The late 1990’s and early 21st century saw an explosion in the production and support for YAL as a whole. For YAL with queer content, authors and publishers began to finally move beyond stereotypic, narrow depictions of queer identity that had dominated the field since Donovan’s *I’ll Get There…* in 1969. During this time, we can identify texts that address a spectrum of queer perspectives (bisexuality, race, class, transgender perspectives), authors who play with traditional
literary conventions (including magical realism, poetic verse novels, historical fiction), and more institutional support and spaces for queer YAL (such as publishing imprints, booklists, awards, research, and conferences) (Cart & Jenkins, 2006).

Throughout the evolution of queer YAL over the past forty years, we can see how the socio-political climate of U.S. society directly correlates with the availability, content, and scope of these titles. A text such as *I am J* by Cris Beam (2011) about a transgender Latino could not have necessarily been written (and certainly not published) in 1970. During the early years of YAL, homosexuality was not discussed whatsoever, was widely viewed as a pathological disorder, or was seen as a passing phase one must overcome. It is also worth noting that the American Psychological Association did not declassify homosexuality as a mental disorder until 1973 (Drescher, 2010). With the evolution of social movements in the U.S. from the 1960’s to today, a growing visibility of queer perspectives (along with the attainment of legal victories), and the erosion of the stigma and shame of being queer, YAL began to slowly reflect the diverse perspectives and intersecting issues that queer life encapsulated for millions of Americans.

Throughout the history of queer content in YAL (1969-today), we can recognize the foundational steps that this literary legacy has established. While it is necessary to critique stereotypes and limitations of early queer YAL, we must also recognize its significance in a longer trajectory. The coming out process was a much different phenomenon in U.S. society in 1969 as opposed to 2014, where we now have kids coming out in elementary school. It makes sense, then, that the main character in the first queer YAL novel (Davy in *I’ll Get There...*) must repress his homosexual feelings and stay in the closet in 1969 as opposed to David Levithan’s main character, Paul, in his 2003 novel *Boy Meets Boy*, whose Kindergarten teacher lovingly informs him he is gay. We can understand how the evolution of queer content in YAL began to
take on a more diverse spectrum of issues, perspectives, and themes by merely looking at the context and social conditions in which the text was produced.

While YAL as a whole has exponentially expanded in breadth, content, and scope since the 1960’s, we can noticeably see how the changes in the culture and world around us are reflected in the stories that have been and are currently being written for adolescents. Adolescents are a unique population because of the complex social, biological, emotional, and psychological developmental issues that are at play during these formative years. Certainly feeling like an outsider—because of whatever social marker—during these years can potentially be an extremely tormenting experience, depending upon one’s support and positioning within the community. For adolescents who are either questioning their sexuality or are self-defining as queer, how one understands and navigates the world very much depends upon the support they have around them, the information they have access to, and the social attitudes of the society in which they are emplaced.

As students in secondary schools, adolescents must complete compulsory English/Language Arts courses and are expected to prove proficiency in reading and writing (among other requirements). Many adolescents are avid readers, many are struggling—all deserve access to high quality, relevant literature through public institutions, such as schools and libraries (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009; Crumpler & Wedwick, 2011; Stallworth, 2006). Being exposed to literary texts and information written for and about adolescents can greatly impact school success for young adults. It can also influence the development of one’s understanding of self as well as impact relations with family, friends, and the society in which one is emplaced. Students who are questioning their sexuality or self-identify as queer, as well as non-queer students, can all find value in reading stories or information that is relevant to their lives and
situatedness (Rohlfing, Rehm, & Goecke, 2003). YAL represents a profoundly valuable resource for both helping adolescents see themselves or familiar situations reflected in the pages of a book and facilitating the connections with others outside of our identities or backgrounds (Martino, 2009; Blackburn, 2012).

**Queering the Literary Landscape**

Queer/questioning youth are typically feeling a myriad of conflicting emotions and messages about their identities and development through a host of different channels during childhood and adolescence. By having access to quality YAL with queer content, queer/questioning youth have avenues to explore these emotional and psychological uncertainties they might be experiencing in their lives. Perhaps a middle school gay male football player in a rural community might find a deeper understanding of his situatedness after reading Bill Konigsberg’s *Out of Pocket* (2008) or a questioning transgender F-M adolescent in the Midwest might have the courage to discuss his feelings with his family after finding *Parrotfish* (2007) by Ellen Wittlinger. Certainly, the outlet of YAL has the potential to help queer/questioning youth navigate the complex social, emotional, and psychological factors involved with growing up queer in the U.S. For non-queer adolescents, chances are high that they know or will know a queer individual, either in their family or in their social networks. In order to facilitate a deeper and more nuanced understanding of queer identities, perspectives, and issues, YAL also has the potential to bridge these connections with non-queer adolescent readers. Regardless of sex, gender, or sexual orientation, queer content in YAL represents an extremely useful way in which to support the increasingly complex developmental needs and understandings of all adolescents in U.S. society.
Indeed, much of the research on multicultural literature for children and young adults incorporates the metaphor of mirrors, windows, and doors, as a way to conceptualize the processes of interaction that occur when engaging in reading. Botelho & Rudman (2009) claim that these are:

Powerful metaphors because they presuppose that literature can authentically mirror or reflect one’s life; look through a window to view someone else’s world; and open doors offering access both into and out of one’s everyday condition. The mirror invites self-contemplation and affirmation of identity. The window permits a view of other people’s life. The door invites interaction. (p. xiii)

Literature written for and about young adults certainly has the potential to help adolescents look at themselves reflected in the pages of a book, see beyond the window to how others experience the world, and go through the door to interact with others through the experiential process of reading. This is a potentially powerful concept for all adolescents, but has profound implications for young adults who are on the margins of society, such as queer youth. But these interactions simply do not happen spontaneously for all young people reading multicultural texts. As educators and researchers, we must also actively work to create spaces and opportunities for adolescents to have critical dialogue with the text and with others to foster this collaborative interaction.

Incorporating the lens of queer theory into a literary framework, readers are allowed the space for a constant questioning, deconstructing, rearranging, and theorizing about how individuals, groups, and identities are constructed and represented through texts. Particularly for the field of literacy, we can directly attempt to deconstruct and complicate heteronormativity through literature using queer reading practices, as synthesized by Cherland and Harper (2007)
(see Appendix A). While not simply about reading queer literature (although this approach would also work well under this framework), queer reading practices involve discussions and critiques of normative identities found in varying social, historical, cultural, and political contexts. Ultimately, the goals with queer reading practices are to facilitate deconstructed understandings of how identities are produced, regulated, communicated, and normalized in a society, as well as by whom and for what purposes.

Methodological Reflections on Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guide this study have been explored through qualitative and quantitative research agendas that seek to explore how these issues play out within culture. Focusing on the examination of how queer or questioning people live out their lives, research initiatives have been employed in the following fields: psychology, sociology, politics, geography, health, education, media, and law. Through quantitative and qualitative orientations to research agendas that incorporate a range of theoretical lenses in which to explore these topics, we are in a moment where researchers are engaged in a larger project of more deeply understanding how queer people (including queer youth) navigate the social landscape and structures in which they interact.

Because queer or questioning adolescents represent a unique population in terms of access, visibility, and safety concerns, research studies that target this population must strategically think through the most appropriate and conscientious approach to selecting, learning from, and addressing the needs of queer youth. Many research projects with queer youth involve quantitative orientations that seek to establish a baseline statistical representation of the percentages of queer youth who experience a phenomenon (coming out, bullying, support structures, health issues). For qualitative research projects working with queer youth, a range of
methods have been employed to tap into their stories, perspectives, and voices to learn from their everyday lived experiences. Many of these research studies use traditional qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups. More recently, many educational scholars using qualitative methods for learning about the experiences of queer youth have been incorporating participatory frameworks that seek to embed the researcher in a space where participants are already living out their everyday lived experiences. In a move to bring the researcher closer to the participant and not have a distanced view of queer youth as Other, researchers incorporating a participatory framework directly view participants as equal contributors to the knowledge generated in the study. Methods typically used in these participatory studies around issues that affect queer youth include interviews, field notes, and observations in a long-term setting.

**Previous Research with Queer Youth in Educational Contexts**

It is also important to examine the ways in which these topics have been explored through educational research agendas because this dissertation directly attempts to use these theoretical and conceptual frameworks as a lens in which to both explore participants’ stories and perspectives about the access to queer content and contributions they had in middle and high school and learn directly from them about ways to make educational settings better for all students. For educational research, there has been a tremendous swell of scholarship, research, books, trainings, and Internet postings about the need for educators and administrators to include queer perspectives in their programming. Much of this scholarship focuses on: preservice and inservice teachers’ perspectives on working with queer youth; the need for school counselors to take into consideration students’ sexual orientation and gender expression; sex education; gay/straight alliances in secondary schools; cognitive and physical ability of queer students; gay families’ experiences with children in schools; and research on queer educators themselves.
In addition to research that has been conducted with students and educators in K-12 school settings, many studies have also been conducted with queer college-aged students. An overview of this research reveals many of the same topics that have been conducted with K-12 queer students, including: heterosexual perceptions, attitudes, and discrimination of queers; health issues like HIV awareness and condom usage; gay/straight alliances at the collegiate level; transgender perspectives; and collegiate curricula that is inclusive of queer content and contributions. Although this foundation is essential to understand how queer youth live in and through their situated cultural and physical landscapes, the present study is being conducted to better gauge how the academic and social programming at the secondary school level can help or hinder queer students’ development. The framing around the majority of the previous scholarship on this topic tends to focus on school climate and makes a correlation between harassment, bullying, and school culture and the lives of queer students navigating the secondary school experience.

For the present study, I followed a line of research with queer youth that seeks to understand how participants perceived the formal or informal inclusion of queer content and contributions in their secondary school experiences. Beginning in 1984, the London Gay Teenager Group (a group founded in the 1970’s and run by and for queer youth under the age of 21) initiated this research with a qualitative survey given to queer youth (n=416) under the age of 21 in the London area (Trenchard & Warren, 1984). The study is significant because it stems from a nonprofit organization that recognized a gap in research on the lives of queer youth in the London area. The London Gay Teenager Group recruited two researchers, Lorraine Trenchard and Hugh Warren, to launch the initiative to investigate the oppressive forces in participants’ lives and sought to bring them to light. Although the study addressed a broad range of issues
(family acceptance/rejection, employment, coming out, sex and relationships, police oppression), it is significant for educational research because the survey broached questions about secondary and collegiate school experiences in relation to queer inclusion in curricula and instruction and school safety. The study found that only 35 participants (out of 416) responded that they had experienced helpful discussion or integration of queer issues in their secondary school experiences (Trenchard & Warren, 1984, p. 56).

In 2004, researchers Viv Ellis and Sue High picked up the work that Trenchard and Warren started with their groundbreaking “Something to Tell You” report. The Ellis and High study surveyed queer youth in the UK ages 18-23 (n=284) with demographic and open-ended questions to speak to their guiding research inquiry:

• How do young people who identify themselves as lgb report their experience of secondary schooling, particularly in relation to any problems they might have experienced?;

• How do they feel that questions of sexuality and sexual identity were dealt with in secondary curriculum subjects and did they find this ‘treatment’ helpful?;

• Have lgb-identifying young people’s responses to these questions changed since 1984? (Ellis & High, 2004)

Their study with UK youth revealed that while there had been an increase in the inclusion of queer content and contributions in secondary schools since the initial study in 1984, the ways in which it was included did not necessarily benefit the participants. Rather, the survey revealed that the majority of participants still felt a sense of unease in the ways in which queer content was communicated in their secondary school experiences and continued to report facing problems (such as bullying, abuse, and isolation) in school due to their sexual orientation.
Following this push for research in the UK, two additional studies (Vicars, 2006; Robinson, 2010) were conducted on this topic that focused on small, ethnographic and phenomenological inquiries that tapped into queer college-aged students and their perceptions of how sexuality was addressed in their secondary school experiences. Both studies offer the field in-depth analysis of how curricular and pedagogical decisions by secondary school staff affects queer students’ lives and include practical ways in which schools can better address queer perspectives and issues in their educational programming.

In 2009, Sonja Ellis picked up the research agenda on this topic that began with the 1984 report from The London Gay Teenage Group and surveyed queer students (n=291) from 42 universities across the UK (which she recruited through student union based queer groups). The survey consisted of 25 questions with 5-point Likert-type scales, forced-choice (yes/no) and open-response formats and focused on the collegiate climate for queer inclusivity (Ellis, 2009). The study revealed that while homophobia is not an overwhelming problem, it is still a factor that queer UK participants expressed having to deal with in their everyday lives. Participants expressed that while there was some queer content offered at their university settings, they recommended that the entire university structure needs to implement a zero tolerance policy for all forms of discrimination (including homophobia).

Moving to a U.S. context, there is a growing momentum of academic scholarship and research with queer youth that focuses on their academic experiences in secondary schools. Again, much of this work focuses on the “at-risk” trope for queer students and centers on safe spaces and bullying/harassment policies. Notably, Mollie V. Blackburn is the leading scholar on this topic in the U.S., as her work focuses on in-depth qualitative inquiries and participatory frameworks to investigate the lives and bodies of queer youth (particularly in relation to literacy
and homophobia). For larger quantitative projects that directly work with queer youth to gauge their experiences in public schools, the onus has fallen almost exclusively on the non-profit and governmental sectors. The major studies and scholarship that address this topic in the U.S. come from GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educational Network), the GSA Network (Gay/Straight Alliance), local Safe Schools coalitions (which vary by state), PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), and a limited number of state educational agencies.

The largest and most cited study on the K-12 school experiences of queer youth comes from GLSEN, which began their survey research on this topic in the form of the National School Climate Survey (NSCS) in 2001 and subsequently followed up with the initiative every two years. The latest survey by GLSEN, the 2011 NSCS, reached a diverse, queer student population (n=8, 584) between the ages of 13 and 20 and currently enrolled in U.S. secondary schools. Although the survey focuses on school climate and safety for queer students, there is also a section on inclusive curricula built into the research. Key findings from the report that speak to the current project include:

- Students in schools with an inclusive curriculum heard fewer homophobic remarks, including negative use of the word “gay,” the phrase “no homo,” and homophobic epithets (e.g., “fag” or “dyke”), and fewer negative comments about someone’s gender expression than those without an inclusive curriculum.

- Less than half (43.4%) of students in schools with an inclusive curriculum felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation, compared to almost two thirds (67.5%) of other students.

- Less than a fifth (17.7%) of students in schools with an inclusive curriculum had missed school in the past month compared to more than a third (34.8%) of other students.
• Students in schools with an inclusive curriculum were more likely to report that their classmates were somewhat or very accepting of LGBT people than other students (66.7% vs. 33.2%).

• Students in schools with an inclusive curriculum had a greater sense of connectedness to their school community than other students.

• However, only a small percentage of students were taught positive representations about LGBT people, history, or events in their schools (16.8%).

• Furthermore, less than half (44.1%) of students reported that they could find information about LGBT-related issues in their school library, and only two in five (42.1%) with Internet access at school reported being able to access LGBT-related information online via school computers. (Kosciw, et al, 2012, p. 18)

In addition to the findings of the 2011 NSCS report, GLSEN is also able to compare each year’s findings to previous studies they have conducted. In looking at trends over time, GLSEN noted the following changes since they first began this research in 2001:

• The percentage of students with access to LGBT-related Internet resources through their school computers showed a continued increase in 2011 from previous years.

• There have been no changes over time in the percentage of students reporting inclusion of LGBT-related content in their textbooks.

• However, the percentage of students reporting positive representations of LGBT people, history, or events in their curriculum was significantly higher in 2011 than all prior survey years except for 2003.

• In contrast, the percentage of students who had LGBT-related resources in their school library peaked in 2009 and decreased slightly in 2011. (Kosciw, et al, 2012, p. 134)
GLSEN’s NSCS report is the largest and most prominent research on this subject in the U.S. and is widely used and cited by academics, school systems, governmental organizations, and other non-profit groups. Concomitantly, the report always generates hateful and misguided attempts by opponents to silence, distort, and disrupt the impetus and findings of the research, which speaks to the highly contested nature of this work in the U.S. The findings speak to the complicated nature of living within a heteronormative and homophobic society, both for queer and non-queer students alike.

Other non profit and governmental organizations incorporate the findings of the NSCS report into their work and also offer some support (and some research) on this topic and includes: Safe Schools initiatives, PFLAG, and state jurisdictions which conduct research of this nature within state school systems. One of the most comprehensive reports to come about from this push is the “Implementing Lessons that Matter: The Impact of LGBTQ-Inclusive Curriculum on Student Safety, Well-Being, and Achievement” (Burdge, Snapp, Laub, Russell, & Moody, 2013) survey by the GSA Network in California. After the adoption of the FAIR Education Act in California (which prohibits the discrimination of curricular and pedagogical implementation in public schools in California), the GSA Network worked with California secondary schools, educators, and students to better understand their perspectives on inclusivity of queer content in curriculum and pedagogy. Using survey and focus group methods, the research targeted a small population (n=26) of students, teachers, and school sites to speak to their guiding research questions: “What specific types of LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum or lessons impact student safety and school climate?; Are there specific classes and/or school contexts in which inclusive lessons have the most impact on student safety and school climate?; What obstacles arise in the process of securing acceptance of inclusive curriculum and what solutions, if any, work to
overcome those obstacles?” (Burdge et al, 2013, p. 7).

Although the report is specific for students in the state of California in relation to the implementation of the FAIR Education Act, the findings have implications not only for future research on this topic, but also for policy makers, educators, administrators, students, parents, and community members. In this vein, the purpose and necessity of this dissertation became more clear: With the lack of academic research on this topic, we need more qualitative studies directly learning from the perspectives of queer youth who experience the curricular and pedagogical decisions of school personnel that produce research and counternarratives that have practical implications of the results of these decisions and offer educators suggestions to better address the needs of all of their students. This study fills a gap in research by deliberately learning from out college students about their everyday lived experiences navigating middle and high school as queer or questioning youth. This research study explores the experiences participants had with queer content in their secondary school years and offers them a space to directly offer recommendations for how schools could be better accommodating queer or questioning youth. But this study also is aligned with previous phenomenological and participatory research studies on this topic and is interested in more deeply learning from participants how they understood their lives and sense of self during these years a result of the academic and support structures available to them, as queer youth, in their middle and high school experiences.

Summary

An overview of the guiding theoretical frameworks that undergird the study reveals the historical and practical ways in which the field of education has been influenced by the multicultural progress and the growing recognition of intersecting identities over the past several
decades. Particularly for queer youth populations, research and scholarship continually points to the benefits of the inclusion of queer content or contributions in formalized curricula and instruction. Indeed, all students—regardless of background—can learn about others through the incorporation of diverse perspectives in curricula (the windows and doors metaphor). The call for a multicultural approach to education has been accompanied with a tremendous increase in the materials and pedagogical choices that are now available for educators to incorporate into their classrooms. Whether discussing a text with queer content in an English/Language Arts classroom, relaying the background of queer historical figures in a social sciences classroom, or engaging students in a critique of the heteronormative social norms of a topic, educators across the U.S. have had ample opportunities to learn from the research and listen to the needs of their students to better meet their needs. The current study learned from the experiences of queer college students in relation to the possibilities of multicultural education that should be occurring in public schools across the U.S. and adds to the growing literature and research on this topic.

In this process, the participants themselves had opportunities to open up the conversation to their own personal understandings of the messages they did or did not learn about being queer in a heteronormative society through their formalized secondary school experiences. It is my hope that rather than pinning down and narrowing these understandings, this research project opens up the possibilities for how queer youth are continuing to thrive in the face of adversity and structural obstacles to their full acceptance in society. I follow the impetus in this work from fellow scholars and educators who work with queer youth and attempt to listen and learn from their everyday lived experiences, avoiding marginalizing their perspectives and attempting to put their identities and knowledges into a box. Susan Driver (2008) speaks to this call in research agendas with queer youth as she claims:
The very process of who, what, and how notions of ‘queer youth’ make sense needs to be scrutinized in highly specific ways, treated as a site of analysis and critical questioning that works against binding young people within new definitional regimes of control. The goal is not to encapsulate queer youth once and for all but rather to initiate provisional and detailed analysis of the ways they precariously make and unmake sense of their lives in relation to the world around them. This approach consciously works against attempts to formulate disciplinary knowledges about who queer youth are and what they want and need, preferring to gather a loose and diverse collection of narratives staying close to the uncertainties and challenges of queer youth cultures. (pp. 2-3)

The next chapter connects the implications of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks covered in Chapter II and presents a methodological overview of the research project that seeks to understand how queer youth participants “make and unmake sense of their lives in relation to the world around them” (Driver, 2008, pp. 2-3).
CHAPTER III:
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Overview

This chapter begins by situating the study within the framework of previous research that has been conducted on this topic and reintroduces the guiding research questions. The second section describes the methodological orientation and design of the study and explains selection of the participants and setting, recruitment and access, and gaining Informed Consent. The chapter concludes with an overview of the data collection methods used, procedures for analysis that were conducted, ethical considerations present within the study, and a summary.

Situating the Study

As previously noted, the surge of scholarship and academic research on queer lives and issues that stem from living within a heternormative, homophobic society has found its way into almost all academic fields over the past several decades. This dissertation seeks to better understand how secondary school experiences—in relation to queer perspectives, content, contributions, and support—affected queer college-aged students. A review of the previous studies that work with queer young adults reveals that much of this work continues to focus on the “at-risk” model or the harm that queer youth inherently face in their lives. The central focus on the majority of previous scholarship has also been on statistical (and qualitative) representations of the physical, psychological, and emotional turmoil that queer youth endure in schools and communities. Through this study, I am aligned with a current trend of qualitative, phenomenological research that strives to more deeply explore how these issues play out in
educational contexts with marginalized groups and understand the perceptions and implications of these experiences for queer or questioning youth (Bourdon, 2013; Lloyd, 2012; Cross, 2010; Mominee II, 2012; Corbin, 2011). This study, in line with the previous studies, viewed our queer participants as active, dynamic agents in their lives with stories and perspectives worth investigating through phenomenological qualitative inquiries in order to learn from their everyday lived experiences around a phenomenon.

The following questions guided this study:

1) How do queer college students feel that questions of sexual orientation and gender expression were addressed in their secondary school curricula?

2) Where did queer college students receive instruction and/or access queer content/contributions during their secondary school years?

3) How do participants understand their lives in relation to queer content and contributions that were available to them in their secondary school experiences?

4) What recommendations do queer college students have for secondary schools and curricular choices that might benefit queer or questioning students during their middle and high school years?

**Research Design**

Any research project, policy work, or social services that address marginalized groups are about more than simply restating or reinforcing the status quo. Because marginalized groups are often silenced or relegated to the fringes of society, the impetus in this work must be about creating spaces for individuals and groups to speak out against oppression in their lives, detailing how they are continuing to thrive or live out their lives, and generating counternarratives to resist the normative frameworks that govern their lives. I am aligned with the claim of Clifford
Christians as he states: “The purpose of research is not the production of new knowledge per se. Rather, the purposes are pedagogical, political, moral, and ethical, involving the enhancement to praxis, justice, an ethic of resistance, and a performance pedagogy that resists oppression” (Christians 2002: 409).

While there are certainly necessary spaces and needs for quantitative research around issues that affect queer youth in U.S. contexts (such as health issues, school pushout, bullying statistics, etc.), a qualitative inquiry approach to this research project was much more viable and productive orientation to undertake in seeking to work with and learn from how queer youth experience the world around them. Researchers can never truly grasp or understand any reality, only representations of reality as experienced or lived through by participants (Denzin, 2010). A qualitative inquiry approach to a research interest that seeks to explore how queer adolescents experience and understand queer content and contributions during their secondary school years would potentially create a space to learn from youth themselves—in their own words, interactions, perspectives—about how they experience the heteronormative (and thus often homophobic) world around them. By using a qualitative lens to examine participants’ experiences in secondary schools in relation to queer content, participants generated counternarratives in this research project that offer unique perspectives which differ from mainstream narratives that are often perpetuated about marginalized groups.

Other factors that indicated qualitative inquiry was a viable orientation to research on this topic were the social implications in this work. I was not particularly interested in whether participants enjoyed or despised middle or high school; I sought to explore how the everyday lived experiences of queer youth are/not reflected in the curricular and instructional choices of teachers and schools, how participants understood or processed their situated experiences in
relation to the middle and high school experience, and how that connects to larger sociopolitical structures and messages participants received in their lives (either through home cultures, schooling, media, etc.). Ultimately, my research agenda attempted to learn from how queer youth experienced the world around them—from the macro sociopolitical structures that govern their lives to the micro formations in their local communities—and how queer content and contributions in formalized school settings might help, hinder, or transform these experiences within a heteronormative society (Denzin & Giardina, 2010; Weis & Fine, 2004). Qualitative inquiry is a potentially illuminating orientation to research how queer youth understand their experiences, identities, and situated perspectives in localized communities because it relies upon how individuals interpret, construct, and attribute meaning to phenomena they encounter in their everyday lived experiences (Merriam, 2009).

A phenomenological approach to qualitative research allows researchers to “construct an animating, evocative description (text) of human actions, behaviors, intentions, and experiences as we meet them in the lifeworld” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 19). Phenomenology rejects objective truths and is interested instead in how individuals experience events, processes, or activities. Inherent in the phenomenological approach to research is the understanding that experiences or events are always in the past—both retrospective and reflected in our mind and senses. This approach is interested in how individuals access these events and view or perceive these memories now, in the present. A key component for phenomenological methodology and philosophy is the necessity to use language—the written word particularly—to speak to the everyday lived experiences of individuals. The current project applied a phenomenological lens to the overarching topic of how queer youth experience the curricular and pedagogical decisions of educators and schools during the middle and high school years.
Merleau-Ponty (1962) informs us in his seminal text, *Phenomenology of Perception*, that “phenomenology is the study of essences” (p. vii). Van Manen (1990) explains that by essences, we are focusing on:

A linguistic construction, a description of a phenomenon…a good description that constitutes the essence of something [that] is constructed so that the structure of a lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way (p. 39).

The essence of this research topic revolved around queer, college-aged students reflecting back upon their interactions with queer content and contributions in middle and high school and revealing the significance these experiences played on their adolescent development. The overarching topic and guiding research questions of this project worked well with phenomenology because I was interested in “understand[ing] several individuals’ common or shared experiences of a phenomenon…and develop[ing] practices, policies, or…a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). Again, I was not interested in learning whether participants enjoyed middle school or were tormented in high school (although these experiences did come up with participants). This project attempted to learn from queer participants about how they experienced any direct instruction on queer content in school, through what means they sought out queer content during these years, what ways they continued to navigate and thrive during their adolescent years, and what practices or policies they would implement in schools to make life better for queer or questioning teenagers. Finally, a phenomenological research project works well when working with marginalized groups because life is complex and messy for those living under oppressive conditions in their social environment. I purposefully selected queer college-aged participants because their voices are
often dismissed and silenced, their lives are complex, and their experiences and perspectives truly matter. Phenomenological research allowed the project to “remain oriented to asking the question of what is the nature of this phenomenon as an essentially human experience” and learn from participants’ stories, recollections, and reflections from middle and high school, in relation to queer identity (Van Manen, 1990, p. 62).

**Participants and Setting**

This dissertation deliberately sought to learn from queer college-aged students and their perceptions of the engagement (or lack thereof) with queer content in their secondary school experiences. Previous studies and scholarship on this topic has traditionally focused on either teachers’ perspectives or on students who were currently enrolled in K-12 educational settings during the time of the research. In the pursuit of creating spaces for diverse perspectives in curricular and pedagogical decisions and supportive structures for all students in public secondary schools, it is indeed critical to learn from the teachers and students who are engaged in schooling on a daily basis. Extending from the understandings that these studies offer, the present study offers new perspectives on the topic by focusing on openly queer college-aged students and their recollections on the interactions they had with queer content in their secondary school experiences.

The selected population utilized for this dissertation represented college students who were out/openly queer in their lives and who offered unique perspectives on how their previous experiences with queer content (particularly in school settings) affected their development. Queer college-aged students actively demonstrate what it means to be out in the 21st century and their embodied perspectives reveal much about where we are as a society. Concurrently, these were students who matriculated secondary schools during a time period in which educators and
school systems have been trained on how to address the diverse needs of all of their students through their curricular and pedagogical decisions. Findings from this dissertation contribute to the ongoing research around educational issues for queer youth by focusing on queer college-aged students and learning directly from them whether or not their experiences in secondary schools reflected the push for inclusive curricula, pedagogy, and texts that educators and schools should be incorporating in their programming for students.

Phenomenological research projects seek participants who have experienced a shared phenomenon and are willing and able to articulate their perceptions and understandings of that phenomenon to the researcher (Polkinghorne, 1989; Cresswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). For the research design of this study, purposeful and criteria sampling, as well as snowball sampling methods, were utilized to find participants willing and able to contribute (Cresswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Participants had to meet the following criteria in order to participate in the study: identify as queer (gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, intersex, transgendered, and any individual questioning their place within this spectrum); be currently enrolled in college; be nineteen years of age or older; and be available and willing to contribute to the study at the time of data collection. It was my hope to focus in on and identify a diverse group of queer college students—undergraduates or students pursuing a Master’s degree—and learn from their experiences with queer content in their secondary school years because they could potentially remember examples, mindsets, and emotions from this time period and reflect back on how they were impacted. Additionally, they could offer unique recommendations for how educators could be incorporating queer content into curricula and how schools could be supporting all their students more effectively.

All research was conducted with participants between the ages of 19 and 33 who were
currently enrolled at The University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, a public, research-intensive university in the U.S. South. Six participants matriculated secondary school in the state in which the research was conducted; three participants matriculated secondary schools in three other states in the Southeast U.S., including Tennessee, Louisiana, and South Carolina. Three participants self-identified as female; three participants self-identified as male; one participant self-identified as transgender male; one participant self-identified as genderqueer; one participant self-identified as questioning their gender. Tables 2 and 3 provide an overview of in-state and out-of-state participants’ demographic and educational backgrounds, as self-selected by participants through data collection.

Table 1

In-State Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name, Age, Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender &amp; Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Year Graduated High School</th>
<th>Age Participant Came Out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LC, 27, White</td>
<td>Female, Bisexual</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeffrey, 28, Caucasian/Asian</td>
<td>Male, Gay</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saj, 20, Black/African</td>
<td>Transgender Male, Bisexual</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremy, 33, Caucasian</td>
<td>Male, Gay</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen, 19, Caucasian</td>
<td>Genderqueer, Panromantic Asexual</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan, 22, White</td>
<td>Female, Bisexual</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recruitment and Access

Despite the study being located in a traditionally conservative, religious geographical location, I deliberately targeted spaces on campus to recruit participants for the study in the hopes of reaching openly queer students. Once Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted (see Appendix B), I distributed an electronic call for participants (see Appendix C) and flyer (see Appendix D) to several academic departments, programs, organizations, and contact points at the university. The call for participants provided a brief focus of the study, participant criteria, what was required of potential participants, contact information, and compensation. All participants were given copies of the following books after completion of their contributions to the research: Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence (1994), edited by Marion Dane Bauer; The Full Spectrum: A New Generation of Writing about Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Other Identities (2006), edited by David Levithan and Billy Merrell; and What I Love about Being Queer (2013), edited by Vivek Shraya.

While I received many emails agreeing to distribute the research recruitment information from almost all targeted groups, I received no response from the GSA on campus. Additionally, I put up numerous flyers around campus in the hopes of attracting students who were not

Table 2
Out-of-State Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name, Age, Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender &amp; Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Year Graduated High School</th>
<th>Age Participant Came Out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loki, 23, White</td>
<td>Questioning, Other</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George, 27, White</td>
<td>Male, Queer/Post-label</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calliope, 25, White</td>
<td>Female, Lesbian</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>19/20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
affiliated with the groups or organizations I targeted (although I did notice several flyers torn down around campus a few days after I distributed them). Participants began contacting me inquiring about the project and expressing interest. Through snowball sampling methods, several participants recommended friends or significant others to also contribute to the research. Although responses were initially slow, within two weeks, I had recruited and procured nine diverse participants meeting the criteria and willing to participate in the study. All participants contacted me at my email address and I responded by describing the study more in-depth and attaching the Informed Consent (see Appendix E). All participants expressing interest agreed to take part in this study and the first round of interviews were scheduled one-on-one with participants. Once I had secured a sufficient number of diverse participants to contribute to this study who would provide me with quality, saturated data to answer my guiding research questions, I ceased all recruitment procedures (Seidman, 1998).

**Informed Consent**

Although I emailed participants a digital copy of the Informed Consent during our initial correspondence, I brought a hard copy to our first interview session. Each participant had an opportunity to look through the Informed Consent and ask any questions about the study before signing their name and checking whether or not they consented to being audio recorded throughout the process (which all participants agreed to). The Informed Consent stated, “Your sensitivity and openness during interviews and/or focus groups will always be taken into consideration, and you may choose to end your participation at any time during the process. If at any time the researcher perceives the study to have any detrimental effects on participants or causes a conflict of interest in any way, your participation will be discontinued immediately.” Additionally, I verbally relayed to all participants that they did not have to answer any question
they did not feel comfortable answering. At no time during the data collection process did any participant state or exhibit any resistance, signs of distress, or unwillingness to answer any question presented. Participants were also given the opportunity to create their own pseudonym for how they wanted to be represented in the research. Many participants chose a pseudonym to represent themselves in the research, but interestingly, almost as many specifically chose to include their own name (or a slight variation) to represent themselves in the study as a way to openly declare their perspectives and identities in the research.

**Data Collection**

Qualitative data were collected for this study from nine participants through the following methods: semi-structured, in-depth, phenomenologically based interviews containing open-ended questions; focus groups; and a writing prompt. The following table demonstrates data collection strategies for addressing each guiding research question and is followed by a discussion of each method utilized in this study:

Table 3

*Data Collection Procedures*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Data Collection Procedures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) How do queer college students feel that questions of sexual orientation and gender expression were addressed in their secondary school curricula?</td>
<td>Interviews, Focus Groups, &amp; Writing Prompt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Where did queer college students receive instruction and/or access queer content/contributions during their secondary school years?</td>
<td>Interviews and Focus Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) How do participants understand their lives in relation to queer content and contributions that were available to them in their secondary school experiences?</td>
<td>Interviews, Focus Groups, &amp; Writing Prompt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviews

In order to learn from the everyday lived experiences of participants’ middle and high school years, the first method of data collection utilized in this study centered around interviews. As Seidman (1998) states, “At the very heart of what it means to be human is the ability of people to symbolize their experience through language. Interviewing, then, is a basic mode of inquiry” (p. 2). Through semi-structured, conversational interviews, participants had an opportunity to tap into their experiences from middle and high school, to provide personal recollections and reflections of their direct experiences with being a queer or questioning youth, and to speak to how the level of academic and social support they had in their lives influenced their development. While it is certainly necessary to have statistical analyses of issues that marginalized groups experience in order to raise a base level of awareness, qualitative interviews allow researchers to explore more complex topics and “provide descriptions of phenomena that could have been learned about in no other way” (Weiss, 1994, p. 12). In-depth, conversational interviews work well with phenomenological research projects because, “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 1998, p. 3).

Once participants agreed to participate in the study, a convenient location and time were negotiated between the researcher and the participants through email. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at a convenient date and time for participants and in a secure location on
campus procured by the researcher. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 60 minutes and were audio recorded on a digital recorder. Once Informed Consent was provided by participants, each were asked to complete a Demographic questionnaire (see Appendix F) as an efficient tool to acquire basic demographic information and a preferred pseudonym. Interviews followed a protocol (see Appendix G) to guide the conversation and ensure the researcher touched on all necessary topics.

Throughout interviews, participants were asked to explain, elaborate, and specify their words and ideas to provide validity and to better speak to the overarching questions of this study. This emphasis corresponds with Geertz’s (2000) warning that speaking for participants without a deep understanding “opens one to the charge that one is writing out other peoples’ consciousness for them, scripting their souls” (p. 102). I always attempted to facilitate the interview sessions in a conversational style with participants, navigated by their voices and perspectives, as they constructed meanings around their interactions with queer content and contributions in their secondary school experiences. Again, participants did not have to answer any question they did not feel comfortable answering. I followed Seidman’s (1998) guidance on preserving equity through the interview process:

Being equitable in interviewing research means…valuing the words of the participant because those words are deeply connected to that participant’s sense of worth. Being equitable in interviewing research means infusing a research methodology with respect for the dignity of those interviewed…Equity must be the goal of every in-depth interviewing researcher. Striving for equity is not only an ethical imperative; it is also a methodological one. An equitable process is the foundation for the trust necessary for participants to be willing to share their experience with an interviewer” (p. 93).
Because this research project addressed an historically oppressed population, I always attempted to maintain value, dignity, and respect for the participants and the stories, perspectives, and analyses they brought to the interviews. After interviews were transcribed, all participants were emailed a copy of the transcript and had the opportunity to member check and could request to omit, reword, or change anything in the text after the interviews took place. One participant asked that a reference to a contemporary colleague be omitted from the transcript.

**Focus Groups**

The second method of data collection employed in this study composed of focus groups with participants. As previously noted, the experiences of queer youth vary by geographic location and state-specific policies. Some states (such as the one where the research is being conducted) have policy limitations that prohibit the dissemination of queer content in school curricula and instruction; other states mandate this inclusion. In order to more deeply explore the varying perspectives of participants’ interactions with queer content or contributions in their secondary school experiences in relation to geographic location, two focus groups were conducted with participants. The first focus group consisted of participants who grew up in the state the research is being conducted (and hence presumably matriculated in schools where it was illegal to teach anything queer). The second focus group consisted of out-of-state students.

In this study, focus groups were also utilized as a data collection method to complement interviews and as means of triangulation (Gibbs, 1997; Hatch, 2002). After initial findings were identified from the interview stage of data collection with individual participants, focus groups also allowed the researcher “to probe further issues raised in individual interviews” and “to offer elaboration on ideas expressed earlier” with a group of others who shared similar experiences, perspectives, and marginalization in their adolescent years (Weis & Fine, 2004, p. 31). By
gathering multiple participants together to discuss their experiences in relation to the guiding research questions, focus groups opened up the conversation to more in-depth and complex stories and allowed for an empathetic and shared experience for all involved. One of the main purposes of focus groups is the opportunity to draw upon participants’ attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions in a social, collaborative space that builds on others’ contributions (Gibbs, 1997; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Because all of the participants were queer or questioning and discussing their experiences during youth, they subsequently faced some degree of turmoil as a result of living in a heteronormative, often homophobic, society. Focus groups also work well with sensitive topics in research studies as Barbour (2007) synthesizes: “Focus groups can encourage greater candour raised, especially if groups have been convened to reflect some common attribute or experience that sets them apart from others, thus providing ‘security in numbers’” (p. 21). Both focus groups contained a warm, supportive, and collaborative environment in which each participant shared examples and listened carefully to others’ stories and perspectives.

After interviews had been conducted, group emails and a doodle were sent to both in-state and out-of-state participants to coordinate a convenient time and date to schedule a focus group. Once a date and time had been agreed upon, focus groups took place in a secure location on campus procured by the researcher and was audio recorded with a digital recorder. Focus group sessions followed a protocol (see Appendix H) with general questions to cover, but each session truly turned into an active conversation with participants building off one another’s stories and thoughts. Both focus groups lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. Participants assuredly had the opportunity in the two focus groups to discuss their individual experiences with queer content and contributions they encountered in their secondary school years and compare their
accounts with one another—filled with laughter, head shakes, and excited acknowledgment of one another’s experiences.

During the focus groups sessions, my aim was to elicit multiple perspectives, experiences, and emotions within a group context and to explore the culture of the groups as well as the degree of consensus on the research topic (Gibbs, 1997). I considered it my role to remain attuned to and facilitate the discussions and explorations that were generated in the two focus group sessions (Merriam, 2009). At the culmination of each focus group session, I thanked the participants for their stories and contributions, asked if I could contact them if any further clarification was needed, and distributed their books about contemporary queer life as a compensation for their time. After transcriptions were generated from the focus groups, all participants were emailed a copy of the transcript and had the opportunity to member check and could request to omit, reword, or change anything in the text after the interviews took place, although no appeals were submitted.

Writing Prompt

Another crucial component of this research project revolved around queer participants’ recommendations for the inclusion of queer content and contributions by schools and educators. During focus groups, participants were asked specifically to brainstorm and converse about the fourth guiding research question: What recommendations do queer college students have for secondary schools and curricular choices that might benefit queer or questioning students during their middle and high school years? Additionally, participants were asked at the end of the focus group (before the previous question was posed to them) to complete a writing exercise as a vehicle for them to speak back to their former secondary schools and/or teachers (see Appendix I). Participants all took this letter seriously and engaged in thoughtful, written dialogue with
their schools, school districts, and specific teachers about how they were personally impacted by their access to academic and support structures for queer or questioning identities during their adolescent years. Following completion of the writing prompt during the focus groups, participants could draw from their letters to speak to the final question which asked them to brainstorm ways, spaces, ideas, programming, etc. that could be implemented in schools and communities to better address queer or questioning youth.

Data Storage

Informed Consent forms, demographic questionnaires, transcripts, and writing prompts were kept in a locked file cabinet at the researcher’s home during the research process. Digital recordings of all interviews and focus groups were downloaded and saved on the researcher’s personal, password-protected computer as well as on the researcher’s personal, online Dropbox account. In order to maintain participants’ confidentiality and anonymity, participant-selected pseudonyms were used throughout all data so that identities could not be discerned by others. As an additional measure of confidentiality, all digital recordings of interviews and focus groups collected were transcribed directly by the researcher and were saved in the same secure method as the digital recordings. No other person had access to the researcher’s personal computer at any point during the research process.

The collected data was gathered for the purpose of the researcher’s doctoral dissertation, but also might be used in future publications or projects. If future research projects utilize data collected for this dissertation, confidentiality will continue to be maintained for all participants. At the culmination of the dissertation process, all hard-copy materials with participants’ information included will be destroyed and all digital files will be permanently deleted from the researcher’s online Dropbox account. Digital files of data from this research study will be kept
on the researcher’s personal, password-protected computer for five years following the completion of the study.

**Data Analysis**

In phenomenological research, it is necessary to begin the analysis stage with an epoche, which is the “process the researcher engages in to remove, or at least become aware of prejudices, viewpoints or assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation” (Katz, 1987, p. 46). Because I am a queer researcher who works in the field of public education, I have direct experiences and assumptions regarding the overarching research study and guiding questions. It was necessary for me to constantly recognize my own personal experiences and viewpoints on discussions and ideas that arose and open myself up to how participants were sharing their experiences and interpretations of the phenomena being examined throughout data collection and analysis. This process is not interested in identifying an objective truth of the phenomenon from participants’ perspectives, but rather requires the researcher bracket out any preexisting bias I brought to the study and instead focus on the subjective experiences participants shared about the phenomenon being examined (Moustakas, 1994).

From transcriptions of the interview and focus group sessions, coding was conducted with the data and themes were generated (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Under a phenomenological framework, developing themes from the data is “not a rule-bound process but a free act of ‘seeing’ meaning...Theme gives control and order to our research and writing” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 79). Themes in phenomenological research allow the researcher to attempt to make sense of the experiential structures of the phenomenon that participants are speaking to. Throughout the data analysis processes of this study, I used the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that informed this study as a lens in which to view and understand the coding
process and exploration of themes. Once themes were generated, I identified corresponding quotes, sentences, and significant statements in the transcriptions where participants were addressing the theme (“treat[ing] each statement as having equal worth” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 159)). I generally followed Smith and Osborn’s (2003) suggestions for Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) beginning with close interpretive readings of each transcript, recording initial responses in the left margin. As I continued to read through the transcripts, the initial responses became themes that I recorded in the right margin. Subsequently, themes were listed, clustered, synthesized, and compared with original data to generate larger categories that encompassed themes that emerged through data analysis.

Next, I generated a textural description of what participants experienced in relation to the phenomenon. This entailed a description of the level of academic and social support each participant experienced in relation to queer content or contributions during their adolescent years. I then wrote a structural description of how participants experienced the phenomenon, which specifically takes into account “the setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 159). Through this process, I incorporated participants’ words and direct quotes to create these descriptions that detailed what and how participants experienced navigating secondary schools as a queer or questioning student. While participants had opportunities to verify and/or change anything in transcripts or the final product, it should be noted that I, as researcher, am telling their stories and therefore these accounts are reconstructed according to my interpretive lens.

By describing the feelings, recollections, and perspectives of participants now—looking back upon their middle and high school years—the structural description specifically explores how participants experienced life as a queer or questioning youth. This process of analysis is
called the imaginative variation and “has to do with trying to see the object of study—the phenomenon—from several different angles or perspectives” (Merriam, 2009). This process gets back to the essence of the study and details both what and how participants experienced the phenomenon in relation to the guiding research questions (Cresswell, 2007). Additionally, the stories and perspectives participants brought to this study, as presented through the textural and structural descriptions, present counternarratives that directly speak back to much of the U.S. public/political discourse that is traditionally perpetuated around queer youth in general and incorporating queer content and contributions in secondary schools specifically.

As a means to get to the essence of the phenomenon, I next detailed a rendering of the major themes that emerged from the data. Descriptions of these themes highlight what was the essential essence of the phenomenon under inquiry in this study and answer the guiding research questions. The description of the themes, or essence, combined with the textural and structural descriptions of participants’ experiences with the phenomenon, address both what was experienced by participants and how they experienced it. Findings generated through these steps of analysis speak to the first three guiding research questions around the phenomenon being explored through this study (what and how participants experienced interactions with queer content as adolescents in secondary schools).

In order to speak to the final guiding research question (recommendations participants have for creating spaces for queer/questioning adolescents in schools), I coded and analyzed the data to generate categories and themes that represent specific recommendations participants called for in interviews, focus groups, and the writing prompt. Descriptions of these recommendations are provided and use participants’ words and direct language to create a practical synthesis of ways that schools (and communities) could be better addressing the needs
and identities of queer/questioning youth (and by extension, all youth). Finally, I compared data across all participants and their specific demographics to explore differences that existed, as well as looking at variations in responses that developed through the in-state and out-of-state focus groups. Again, I approached this process understanding that there can be no objective truth or absolute finding in a phenomenological research study, only representations of participants’ experiences and perceptions as they share them and are interpreted by the researcher (Moustakas, 1994).

**Ethical Considerations**

Through the process of this research project, I attempted to maintain a level of openness and support as I worked with participants. My beliefs on the role of the researcher in this process do not stem from an authoritative or exact approach to learning from participants’ lives and stories, but rather from a place of “compassionate understanding” (Heshusius, 1994, p. 6). Because of the sensitive nature of working with queer participants, it was essential to maintain a level of support, privacy, and open-communication between participants and myself. These ethical ideals must be maintained in order to preserve the integrity of the experiences of queer individuals and communities, who still must navigate their lives under oppressive structures guiding how they are expected to live their lives, as well as providing a level of trustworthiness in the data collected throughout the process.

It was my intention to never judge, speak over, or presume anything about the participants in this study. I did seek to create a space and a research project that enabled participants to speak freely and take ownership over the focus groups and interviews by focusing on the contributions they offer to the guiding research questions of the study, evoking Etherington’s (2007) claim that “by acknowledging my participant’s power—as well as, and
alongside, my own—we would be able to engage in more equal negotiations concerning [their] involvement in my study” (p. 602). For my part in this process, I attempted to remain open and flexible during this project and tried not to stick to a script or specific questions that I feel needed answering. I shared my connections to participants’ stories, examples, or humor as it came up in interviews and focus groups and it was most certainly a collaborative and supportive space.

Again, it was be my priority to listen and learn from participants as they came together to reflect upon and discuss their experiences with queer content and contributions during their middle and high school years. As we negotiated our roles during interactions, interviews, and focus groups and learned from one another throughout the process, I attempted to use Etherington’s (2007) guidelines for ethical research in practice and through my writing:

• To remain aware of the potential power imbalance between researcher and participants, especially where there are current or previous boundary issues created by dual relationships, and where there are issues of race, gender, age, etc.;

• To negotiate research decisions transparently with participants, and to balance our own needs with those of participants and agencies involved;

• To provide ongoing information as it becomes available, even when that requires the use of appropriate and judicious researcher self-disclosure;

• To include in our writing and representations information about research dilemmas that may occur, and the means by which they have been resolved. (Etherington, 2007, p. 614)

**Modifications to the Study**

Throughout the recruitment of participants and data collection processes of this study, some accommodations to the research design were made. Because initial outreach and recruitment of participants took place at the end of the academic semester, scheduling became a
time-sensitive issue for arranging interviews and focus groups. Six participants were able to take part in both the individual interviews and focus group sessions, as well as complete the writing prompt. Three of the participants could not meet until after the culmination of the semester and were unable to take part in the focus group sessions. Each of these three participants were individually interviewed at length (ranging from 60 to 130 minutes) where they answered all of the questions and topics from the interview and focus group protocols and completed the writing prompt.

**Summary**

This chapter provided a methodological overview for this qualitative phenomenological inquiry and outlined a rationale for the research design, the methods of data collection, selection of participants and setting, recruitment and access for participants, informed consent measures, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations. The next chapter presents findings from the data generated through this research methodology.
CHAPTER IV:
RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter reports findings that emerged from collected data in interviews, focus groups, and a writing prompt conducted with nine diverse queer college students. The chapter begins by offering a detailed exploration of each participant’s story, which includes a biographical overview as well as a textural and structural analysis of their experiences as queer or questioning adolescents navigating middle and high school. Again, the textural and structural descriptions detail both what and how participants individually experienced the phenomenon around access to academic and social support in secondary schools as a queer or questioning youth. Following each participant’s textural and structural analyses, the chapter next presents a description of the major categories and themes that emerged from the data offering further insight into the collective experiences participants shared around the phenomenon of going through middle and high school as a queer or questioning student. These sections answer the first three guiding research questions:

1) How do queer college students feel that questions of sexual orientation and gender expression were addressed in their secondary school curricula?

2) Where did queer college students receive instruction and/or access queer content/contributions during their secondary school years?

3) How do participants understand their lives in relation to queer content and contributions that were available to them in their secondary school experiences?
As a way of speaking to the fourth guiding research question (What recommendations do queer college students have for secondary schools and curricular choices that might benefit queer or questioning students during their middle and high school years?), the chapter next presents recommendations participants offered secondary schools, which are grouped by area of improvement with an explanation of each. Finally, the chapter concludes by analyzing data across focus groups and taking into consideration variations in participants’ secondary school backgrounds (geographic location, type of school, size).

The Experiences

Participant: LC

LC is a White, 27-year-old female who grew up in a rural/suburban community in Alabama. She graduated high school in 2005, self-identifies as bisexual, and came out when she was 25 years old. LC graduated from a medium-sized, public high school in a rural/suburban setting.

Textural Description

Attending secondary schools in a rural/suburban community, LC continued to reinforce that the concept of “gay” or the idea of being out of the closet was not even an option for her during adolescence. LC indicated that her secondary schools did have a larger Latino/Hispanic population and there was a group for them in her school, as well as the predominant Southern Baptist church population that attended the school. LC did indicate that her school created some spaces for other marginalized groups such as a music group that incorporated recently adopted Haitian families in the community. When asked if she had access to a space or group within her middle or high school setting that specifically addressed queer issues, LC said, “There were other
groups that were made toward minorities, but nothing like that.” When asked if the concept of “gay” even came up in school, LC responded:

In middle school it wasn’t even a concept. It was sort of like a derogatory thing you would say about people, but I don’t think anybody in middle school even recognized what it entailed. I think people now, it could be me being naïve, but I feel like now it’s more in the culture and it’s more in TV and entertainment sort of things. And I feel like people, at a younger age, are even aware of these concepts. But I don’t think in like sixth, seventh, and eighth grade I even thought about it. I didn’t even think about if I wanted to date a boy—that just didn’t even occur to me.

Additionally, LC also did not have a space to learn about queer identities outside of her school environment, nor did she know any other friend or classmate who identified as queer during middle or high school. When asked whether there was a teacher or adult at school who was out, LC thought for a moment and reflected back upon the community suspicions of two teachers. LC said:

Yes, actually. I remember there being a couple of teachers that we thought did…or we had seen them with their boyfriend or girlfriend. But it was never…we never asked. So, it was just us assuming in middle school and high school. But I remember, I guess it was the choir director and the assistant band director and a florist that had all gone off to school and came back. And when they came back, I guess they were more used to it being okay. So, I remember them being around. But again, it wasn’t like—nobody ever talked about it or said anything. At the time, I remember asking my mom because I just didn’t understand, and her being like we don’t talk about that. So, it just did not come up.

When asked whether her teachers from middle or high school engaged classes in conversations around bigotry, LC explained:

A little bit. But not nearly, looking back, to the extent that it should have been. My high school was like 40% Hispanic and 60% Caucasian and, I think in my high school it was like 900 people, and there were four African Americans. And so, I remember the teachers saying things if anybody would ever pick on or bully the African American kids. But it was almost more because there were only four of them in the entire school. I remember Hispanic kids getting beaten up. And nobody really said much. I hadn’t really thought about that. People said things, but not nearly to the extent that they should.
She indicated that teachers were implicated in this because they were either the perpetrators of the bullying, or were negligent to prevent it. LC also specifically remembers that there was no mention of homophobia in schools “because it would have been so shocking to hear a teacher actually say.” LC also stated that her middle school environment was certainly not safe for queer or questioning students, teachers, or staff, but did indicate that her high school environment was a bit safer. She stated:

I don’t know if it necessarily was a school change or if just, like we talked about, like, being gay or being queer-those kinds of things were becoming more in the public eye, so it was more normal. It was still very abnormal in my high school, but it wasn’t as strange to think about it. It wasn’t like middle school. So, it was safer, but it [being openly gay] still didn’t really happen.

When asked if LC had access through school to representations of queer identities or histories, she vaguely remembered an English teacher in high school who was not from her community mentioning something indirectly about the author’s sexuality like it was not really a big deal. LC did note that her school was a large school that excelled more at liberal arts than sports and she specifically indicated that show choir was a space in her high school experience that did queer the norm. When asked if queer issues were directly addressed through music, drama, or arts in her school, LC stated:

Those circles sort of embraced every spectrum of stereotypical-anything. I spent every Saturday from end of January to the beginning of March on a bus with boys doing my makeup for show choir. [However], in the classes, like choir, which was a huge part, it never came up. But then when we would travel, we would see schools from the North or other teachers or other things. And it wasn’t weird. It was just normal. But we never talked about it at school.

When asked if any of her male choir friends who did her makeup on these trips were openly queer during high school, she reflected:

I mean, one of them is a really good friend of mine. He sort of had alluded to things. And got picked on for like joining the cheerleading squad. But it was just one of those,
he just got picked on. And I think, he knew that we all knew and we all knew that he
knew, but we just didn’t talk about it. Just because he got hell all the time.

Despite the “hell” that her friend experienced in high school, LC believes that the choir director
created a safe space for all of his students during high school, although homosexuality was never
directly addressed:

Completely. Like, things like that never came up. They didn’t even talk to, like, straight
people about their relationships. That just didn’t come up in general. Which I can sort of
get. Cause, I mean, the choir director’s a guy. I’m sure he didn’t want to talk to girls…I
get that. But, he wasn’t judgy, he wasn’t…at all. I don’t know if he would call himself
an ally, but everybody just trusted him.

Reflecting back upon high school and specifically the inclusive space that the choir provided
students, LC said:

The year after I graduated, four or five different guys ended up coming out-they were all
in that circle. And then a couple of guys, I was telling a friend the other day, like because
that realm of my school was so different from the rest of the school, a couple of the guys
just didn’t ever actually feel the need to come out. They just...are. It doesn’t matter. It
doesn’t have to be a conversation…it just is. Which I thought was really cool, because
my younger sister was telling me about it a couple of years later. And I was like, Oh!
The school’s changing then. Cool!

When asked about how sexual education was presented to students in her secondary
school experiences, LC noted that it was solely heteronormative and did not make space for other
ways of being:

I don’t even think it came up. I don’t think, like, the thought that a guy could be with a
guy or a girl could be with a girl or a guy could be anything else or that a girl could be
anything else. Or that it wasn’t black and white. I don’t remember that actually even
coming up. At all...like, at all. That’s weird.

LC did not actively seek out queer content or information during her adolescent years. When
asked if she read any queer young adult or adult literature during those years, she indicated, “I
don’t remember because I remember being so caught off guard if I read anything with anything
remotely gruesome or sexual or anything. I was really prudish and quiet, so anything that was
strange, I would just freak out.” Although she has always been a very active reader, LC never really utilized her school libraries but instead frequented the public library often and liked to look through and purchase used books with her mother. She did have access to a computer at home, but it was very closely monitored by her parents. When participants were asked to focus in on the main places and ways they received any information about queer identities during adolescence, LC reflected, “I think mine’s actually TV and music videos, things like that. Like MTV or something. Cause I didn’t really have any books that said anything. I remember thinking that I would see things in movies or TV afterschool when I could watch whatever that was sort of different.” According to LC, the positive breakthroughs in TV and media in relation to queer content and identities as she grew up “just gave me the words that I knew I wanted to say but I just wasn’t sure what they were.”

**Structural Description**

Throughout interviews and focus groups, LC continued to reinforce that the idea that being gay was not even an option for her in middle and high school. LC reflected:

I didn’t really fully comprehend what gay was. It was just a slur that people threw out there. And I was really shy and really quiet. I remember in p.e., this kid called me gay. And I don’t even think he knew what it was. Everybody just knew it was a negative connotation. And for the rest of the year, it was the worst school year of my entire life. It was just that snowball effect of people talking about you and people putting this sort of—not that anybody even knew what the word meant. It was horrible.

It is also important to note that LC stated that she hated her middle school experiences.

LC did have a strong and supportive home environment growing up. She relayed:

My dad’s an art teacher and I grew up with weird naked images on the walls in my house. Show choir, theatre, drama around, just different spectrum of people that weren’t from our school. So, that was a different. But it was like two separate, complete things. It wasn’t in school necessarily.
This support assuredly contributed to LC’s sense of self and her positive development into adulthood. But when asked to reflect on the idea of being out in middle or high school, LC explained:

I can’t think of a single person who was openly gay when I was in high school. But a couple of years after I graduated, there were a ton who had come out and it was not a big deal. And I’m pretty sure now my high school actually does have alliance clubs—things like that. But I can’t think of a sole who was openly-out when I was in high school. And again, I can think of so many now. Because I’m sure that nobody thought that I would be. There’s so many people that, we all just assumed were. And then there’s so many people that I was like shocked. And I shouldn’t have been…it was like, I didn’t even see that. Okay. Good for you. The only person that I ever remember trying to date a person of the same sex in high school got shipped off to the military and the other girl was the youth minister’s daughter at the church and they left town. I think there was more to the story than that…

The environment and lack of access to positive queer representations or identities certainly affected LC’s understanding of self during adolescence. She continued describing her reflections on her own personal coming out narrative:

If you had told me three years ago that I was going to date a girl and be completely happy with it, I would be like, you’ve lost your mind. Cause it had just never occurred to me. And then after, looking back on a lot of things—like, even back to seventh grade, it’s like, oh. But it just…didn’t occur to me. Not that I was upset or anxious—I was happy. I had a good childhood. It was fine, it’s just…hindsight was like, oh, oh—there we go.

In her educational settings, LC did not feel comfortable sharing questions or topics about homosexuality with her teachers or reading books that might have been deemed queer in school. She said:

I remember picking books and being like, *Is anybody going to judge me for this? Is anybody going to see me reading this?* Not that it was anything weird or bad, but because I knew how things came across and I wanted to make sure that I looked really smart and really eloquent and I was also really quiet. So, I picked books with those things in mind. So, no, I don’t think I would have.

When asked if her interactions with queer content or contributions in school positively or negatively influenced her understanding of self, LC responded:
I feel like the little bit that it ever did get brought up, and it was rare, it was done so in such a negative way that it wasn’t something that you desired to necessarily be a part of. Or the group that you wanted to join.

The messages that LC received in school as a student and as a whole human being was that being queer was not a group she necessarily desired to join or was even a possibility during her middle and high school years and that in order to survive high school you had to negotiate and fit into certain cliques.

When asked if she had any support in school, even if that support was not queer specific, that helped her develop her sense of self, LC indicated only friends and nothing at the institutional level of school. Probing further, LC responded that “the desire not to go back to my hometown” was the largest contributing factor to her successfully navigating her way through middle and high school (she left her hometown the day after her high school graduation). She continued, “I was really nerdy. And I was determined to get out and get a scholarship and go somewhere that was not the [local] junior college. I just wanted out, for multiple different reasons.”

Participant: Jeffrey

Jeffrey is a Caucasian/Asian 28-year-old male who grew up in a suburban community in Alabama. He graduated high school in 2004, self-identifies as gay, and came out when he was 17 years old—making him one of only three participants to have been out of the closet while in secondary school. Jeffrey graduated from a large, public high school in a suburban setting.

Textural Description

Jeffrey reported that he “absolutely [did] not” have access to a space or group in middle or high school that addressed queer issues, although he emphasized how prominently local churches and Christian school groups influenced school culture. Through AP coursework and
other classes, Jeffrey did have a teaching staff that taught about racism, bigotry, feminism, and “hints of gender theory” (even reading feminist literature in AP English class). Jeffrey noted that homophobia was not directly addressed by his teachers or though the curriculum at any point. He said:

A lot of the teachers who covered subject areas where you could have ended up talking about that were also church members of some students and things of that nature. And so, if the topic had gotten breached, they would have had to face that outside of the classroom.

He attributed his high quality secondary school experiences to the community in which he grew up:

I think it was the sense of community. Because the area that I grew up in-it’s right outside of Montgomery-and it’s very much the, you know, the bedroom style community. It’s very intimate. Everybody knows everybody’s business type thing. But, at the same time, it’s very close knit. Even city officials are very mission oriented to make sure that the community itself stands together when it comes to national disasters, things of that nature. It’s very teamwork oriented. And so I think that when the administrative side of the school came in to hiring and whatnot, they built that dynamic into the faculty environment. So that you had this kind of quilt work, so to speak, of these different faculty members who came in with different backgrounds. But, they all came in under the same kind of mission statement to provide the most comfortable academic environment possible.

When asked whether he believed his middle school environment was safe for queer or questioning students or faculty, Jeffrey said, “The rules were there and everyone was expected to follow them-faculty included.” When asked what he meant about following the rules, he explained:

I think that, as long as it was outside of the classroom, it was probably okay. But, it was one of those things that it was left at the front door when you walked in. I mean, I’m sure that there was the possibility of faculty members who were queer identified. But, it was never something that was actively discussed or displayed once you got in the school doors. Especially for faculty members and whatnot. You never really wanted to be overtly obvious about anything that could be construed as being detrimental to the learning environment. Especially from an administrative standpoint. You know, you don’t want to dress a certain way that could be considered provocative or distracting. And you didn’t want to carry yourself in a certain manner that could be considered
disturbing to certain students or, again, distracting in the learning environment. Because, you know, from an administrative standpoint, they’re thinking, okay—you’re here to instruct. Bottom line. The kids are here to learn from you.

For high school, Jeffrey expressed that these rules loosened up a bit to account for the maturity of the students and that he would categorize his high school as a safe environment for queer or questioning students.

Jeffrey came out at age 17 and he reported having a group of queer or questioning friends through the school’s large marching band program. He explained:

I was in marching band in high school. And so, I mean, there were several others. And we kind of became friends and whatnot. And we would spend time together because we had similar interests or we just kind of clicked in that way. And most of us were out to other band members and whatnot. It might not have been a school-wide thing, but to the other likeminded individuals being all part of the same organization, we were more like family to each other than the rest of the student population.

Jeffrey’s story is unique from other participants not only because he was out in high school, but he also had a group of friends who also identified as queer. When asked if he or his friends were out to any adults in school, he recalled some older queer students who had paved the way for him by creating a bond with certain ally teachers in the school:

Oh yeah. There were several who were upperclassmen when I came into high school and, by then, they had kind of established a reputation, so to speak. Not necessarily a negative one, but they had established a rapport with other faculty or whatnot. And even though they themselves didn’t actively come out in the classroom and say anything. But, there were some queer-identified faculty.

When asked if any of the teachers or adults in his school were out, Jeffrey stated:

They weren’t displaying rainbow flags and things of that nature, and being all, This is a safe space and whatnot. And they didn’t have dialogue pertaining to queer identity or anything. But, you could just kind of tell. I think it was known outside of school in a social setting amongst the local community. I know that there were a couple of female athletic coaches that we knew through the student rumor mill.

Although Jeffrey and his friends had ally teachers and faculty he presumed to be queer, I asked him why he thought no teachers or adults were out in school. He replied:
I think the lack of being vocal had more to do with job security than anything. The Board of Education in that area was very right-wing, religious leaning. It was very white picket fence, Southern Baptist mentality type. So, you know, when your funding depends on someone like that, you tend to kind of toe the line.

Regardless, it is notable that Jeffrey and his friends had a space in their school to go to adults with issues or questions without fear of repercussions. As Jeffrey stated:

Yeah—there were some teachers [who] held an open-door policy, dialogue wise, that you could come to them regardless of the problem—whether it was something at home or something personal or a relationship issue or an academic issue. Or even more of a detrimental issue like depression or things of that nature. There were some select faculty that kind of kept a more extended open door than others.

Again, Jeffrey feels he received a rigorous and broad academic background through his secondary school experiences, but notably did not receive any positive representations of queer identities or history throughout middle or high school. According to him, “It was: you’re taught the staples of what you need to learn in order to get prepared for college.” The only time Jeffrey remembered any mention of queer life at school was through studying for a Scholar’s Bowl competition and self-researching information in books.

While noting he did not have access to a space or group in his community for queer people, Jeffrey did manage to find support through the Internet, which he indicated was probably his only outlet during high school for queer content. He stated, “Definitely there were online spaces. This was, you know, back in the heyday of AOL and whatnot. And of course there were online groups and chatrooms and things of that nature.” Jeffrey also read literature with queer content during these years including classics such as Walt Whitman, Thomas Mann, Oscar Wilde and contemporary fiction like Buffy the Vampire Slayer. When asked how he found books with queer content during these years and/or discovered what his interests were, he recalled his online group:
Mostly, it was Internet based. It would be via chat or whatever, we would be discussing what I was reading or whatnot and somebody would recommend, you know, if you liked so and so then you would like such and such because it’s that plus it’s queer friendly.

Interestingly, Jeffrey illustrated that almost all of the information about queer identities, history, literature, health he received during adolescence was self-initiated and self-taught. He stated:

It would still fall outside of the academic environment. It would be the Internet, social interactions. Even, you know, when I would visit bookstores, I would pick up books on various topics or whatnot. Something that, you know, if the title of the book struck my fancy or something on the cover or even a review on the back or whatnot, I might pick up a book that may not have been something that I would have previously looked at. But something piqued my interest. And I would sit down and end up consuming the book in one night.

**Structural Description**

Again, it is notable that Jeffrey was out in high school, had a group of out friends (to one another and some faculty), and had teachers and allies at school he could talk to about personal or academic issues, including some teachers he knew from the community. When asked whether his interactions with queer content in school positively or negatively influenced his understanding of self, he replied:

I think that, even though my access was somewhat limited due to the academic environment, and so, I had to go to outside sources to find said content, I think it still was, in a way, very much self-empowering. Because it gave me the opportunity to still develop that side of myself and still pursue my academics the way that the school expected me to so that I could still excel by their standards while still holding on to that, hey-I’m doing this under the radar until I’m able to be me while still being this person that they were expecting me to be.

It is this dynamic pull between doing the right thing and following the rules while seeking out knowledge for yourself and exploring self-interests during high school that helped navigate Jeffrey through these years. When asked what messages he received about himself as a student and as a whole human being through school, Jeffrey returned to this idea of individual academic pursuits instilled in him:
I think a large majority of the messages that were directed towards me as an individual were all purely intellectually based. They were all academically based. It was, you know, you’re a very gifted student and you have all this potential and so on and so forth. You know, keep pushing for this that and the other and you’ll succeed.

Part of achieving his potential for success meant Jeffrey learning and following the formal and informal rules that governed his middle and high school experiences. While he was successful academically and out as a gay adolescent, he still had to navigate his high school environment in particular ways. For example, when asked whether he would have felt comfortable reading a book with queer content in high school, Jeffrey replied:

As long as it wasn’t, you know, as long as the queer content wasn’t overtly present on the cover, then I usually didn’t have a problem with it. Just simply because back then, it was easier to not draw attention to yourself than to, you know, walk around with it plastered on back—like a Superman cape. I mean, if you’re one of those kids who loves to read constantly and you’re walking down the hall…cause I mean in high school, people were walking down the hall and reading constantly. They would look under the book to make sure they weren’t going to step on anybody and they’d peer over the book to make sure they weren’t running into anybody. But, if you’re walking down a hall with 2,000 other kids and your book is wrapped in rainbow flags, people are going to stop and look.

So, while he knew the rules that governed his school and knew that he could not read a book “wrapped in rainbow flags” in school, Jeffrey also learned through school that he could pursue those interests in subversive ways in school or outside of school on his own. He stated:

I was still reading what they considered to be subversive literature, you know, when no one was looking. But, at the same time, I was still being the die-hard academic that’s in every honor’s class and is doing everything by the book and is still performing, you know, at a 4.0 level. But, when no one’s looking, was reading content that they would be like, shame on you.

Reflecting back upon his secondary school experiences, Jeffrey recalled the supportive networks that helped develop his sense of self during these years including a dynamic science teacher at his school who he was an aide for after completing academic requirements his senior year. This teacher instilled in Jeffrey a drive to seek out knowledge and he described his
interactions with her helping develop a “fervor for academics [that] was sparked even further.”

He continued on about this teacher:

It was kind of like we had that in common of being that kind of trailblazing mentality of: *I’m going to do this this way, even though it’s expected that we go this way.* So, we kind of shared that, you know, dare-to-be-different mentality.

When asked about the largest contributing factors to him successfully navigating his secondary school experiences, Jeffrey recounted:

I think it was having—however small it may have been—having that succinct but intimate network of people that I could trust. And then couple that with the self-initiative to discover new things and to deal with the void, so to speak. And at the same time, that persistent urge to, you know, self-preserve and survive the nightmare that is high school anyway. So, I mean, I think it’s a combination of the individual coupled with a support network of some sort—regardless whether it be a support network of a hundred or it be a support network of three.

I asked Jeffrey to explain what he meant when he was referring to “filling the void.” He went on to explain:

Kind of the inner questions that I had in terms of, you know, why do I feel this way about certain things? Why are these things becoming prevalent at this point in my life? What’s going on, you know, on this part of me? And I think that that’s something that’s extremely commonplace during that time period for a lot of queer identified teenagers. It’s the, you know, why is this happening? And especially living in the South, you go: Why is this happening? Did I do something wrong? Am I being punished for something? It’s like, you know, who did I screw over to deserve this?

Jeffrey’s point in this explication beautifully describes the complexities of identity development during adolescence. But this passage also poignantly illustrates the feelings that countless queer youth experience as they are left with little support systems to help them understand if they are doing something “wrong” or deserve “punishment.” This lack of adequate networks of support and the invisible or distorted representations of queer identities they have access to during these years lead many queer youth to seek out ways to fill the void in their own lives.
Participant: Saj

Saj is a Black/African 20-year-old transgender male who grew up in a suburban community in Alabama. He graduated from a medium-sized, public high school in 2012 and self-identifies as bisexual. Saj disclosed his chosen gender around 16 years of age and came out to others about his bisexuality around 19 years of age.

Textual Description

When asked whether his middle or high school had a space or a group that addressed queer issues, Saj quickly replied, “Absolutely not. No way possible.” He did note the presence of a faith-based group in his school, but did not know of any other spaces for marginalized students in his middle or high school. When asked whether his middle school was a safe environment for queer or questioning students or faculty, Saj said resoundingly “no.” He went on to explain, “The ones who there were rumors about, and who were later confirmed as gay or whatever, they were talked about horribly in the hallways. So, yeah-no way.” Although Saj did admit that he believed his high school environment was safer for queer or questioning students or faculty, he did recount some harrowing accounts from this time related to the few students at his school who were openly queer:

Like, the ones who were loud and proud about it. There were a couple of those. But, they definitely had their own share of issues. I can remember issues, like situations of them being harassed and assaulted in the hallways, primarily verbal. Especially as a, well at the time, questioning student, it really made me feel kind of scared.

When asked about coming out as transgender and as bisexual, Saj discussed his experiences:

I did come out to close friends (whom had moved away but kept in contact) and my immediate family as transgender at 16 but was still in the closet at school and work. It wasn't until 19 or so that I mentioned being bi to my parents and some acquaintances from high school.
Saj reported having access to an online space during these years that helped him contextualize and learn about queer issues. He recalled:

Online space is pretty much where I got most of it. As far as the community goes, there’s not really anything in the city. I don’t even think there’s a PFLAG chapter in the city. So, I didn’t have any resources there. But online, certain websites and sort of forums, whatnot, is pretty much where I spent most of my time.

He also relayed that he connected to “ambiguous” music during middle and high school that touched on queer issues or were performed by queer artists. Saj indicated that there were a few other classmates or friends who also identified as queer during these years, as well as some who continued to stay in the closet until after graduating high school. He recounted:

An acquaintance, yes. And I had friends whom I knew were queer in some way or another, but they weren’t open about it necessarily. It was just more so, I don’t know, hinting. But I just picked up on them, so yeah.

When asked if any adults or teachers were openly queer during middle or high school, Saj recalled suspicions of certain teachers that were later confirmed, but no teachers or adults were out during his secondary school years.

As I asked Saj about the quality of his instruction, he noted that he never had a teacher directly teach about bigotry, racism, or sexism and even stated that the opposite was true. He recalled a teacher in his middle school classroom discussing slavery:

Well, there was a moment in either my sixth or seventh grade history class, one of my instructors sort of made the comment that slaves were better off as slaves and that it was actually an easier life to live (laughs). And how many of you, if you had the choice, would have chosen. And like everybody raises their hand, I would much rather be free, thank you!

Although homophobia was never directly addressed in instruction through teachers, Saj did reveal that he had “generally accepting” teachers that would intervene if issues arose, but never in a manner that was a teachable moment about homophobia. When asked to provide an example, Saj described the following story from high school:
Not necessarily bullying. Like, I guess the specific example I’m thinking of is like in a chemistry class of some sort. We were talking about heterogeneous and homogeneous and you know how kids will sometimes make that, *Oh, homo joke* (laughs) and stuff like that. And so then, like, sometimes it gets annoying. Other times it sort of blows right over. But I do distinctly remember my chemistry teacher at the time being like, *Okay, that’s not funny* and kind of getting onto them. And that was the only time.

Although Saj does not recount a specific instance of instruction or support in terms of homophobia (or bigotry in general) from his schooling, he does recount ways in which teachers intervened and were supportive, at times, of students in the classroom.

Saj is the type of student who would very much be aware if he had positive interactions with queer content while in middle or high school. When asked if he was ever taught about queer contributions or histories in school, he recalled:

> Well, not within the lesson itself. I mean, in our textbooks, there would be like a tiny little chapter insert on Stonewall riots or something like that. But, if I had not sought it out myself, I would have never heard about it or seen it myself.

Interestingly, Saj remembers seeing the mention of Stonewall in his history book and self-teaching himself about it without any mention from a teacher in formal instruction. At no other time in Saj’s secondary school experiences does he recall a moment where queer identities were addressed. Saj also did not remember seeing any posters or images for queer events or history displayed in his secondary school environments. While he said the school did not have these images, students would choose to participate in specific queer events like wearing purple in October to symbolize Spirit Day or commemorating the National Day of Silence. I asked Saj how students who participated in these days at school were treated by peers and the school itself, Saj recalled:

> For the most part, at least on the Day of Silence, it was pretty much ignored. There were a couple of comments of like, *That’s kind of a stupid way to commemorate it.* But other than that, it was mostly just passed right over. It never really sparked a discussion of any sort.
Saj also recalls his school newspaper including queer current events that were happening while he was in high school such as the Defense of Marriage Age (DOMA) decision.

Saj was an avid reader and a creative student during middle and high school. Although he did not specifically gravitate to mainstream young adult or adult literature, he did get turned onto authors whose works certainly touched on queer issues, like Julia Serano, Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle*, and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (which Saj reported being “mildly obsessed with” during high school). Interestingly, Saj became drawn to finding and consuming unpublished, online literature during his adolescent years (not fan fiction, according to Saj because “that always sort of threw me off”). When asked how he found out about these texts or about authors he might be interested in reading during middle and high school, Saj pointed to online lists he accessed through his searches for support and access to information on queer topics during these years. He recalled: “Online. Primarily online. Occasionally I would do that-walk by the gay and lesbian section of Barnes and Noble and sneak a peek but not really go-just kidding *(laughs).*”

**Structural Description**

Saj’s story is unique in this study because not only was he one of three participants who was out during high school (and the participant who came out at the youngest age—16) but also because he is the only participant who identifies as transgender. When asked further about accessing queer online spaces during adolescence, Saj reflected:

The first groups that I really found myself into were sort of, I guess androgyny, cross-dressing sort of groups. And from there on, I guess, I mean I guess I had already sort of tinkered around with various LGBT groups in general. But that’s where I first became a part of a community of some sorts. And from there I just sort of made my way on through transgender, bisexual, and everything else.
Saj’s technological savvy indeed proved beneficial for him in school contexts as well. He reported that all of his school computers were blocked from allowing students to access any information on queer topics. Saj found a way around this and was able to bypass the security block and access anything he chose while at school (causing the school to use a new system the following school year).

This awareness that Saj possessed about the ways in which he was being taught and treated as a student carried over into all aspects of his educational experiences. When asked about his reading preferences and what he was exposed to in school classrooms, Saj recalled:

I was pretty much just used to reading books from perspectives of people that just were-blah, you know? I was pretty much used to reading the same old, heterosexual male narratives. At some point I just managed to…I didn’t even think about it until later on in high school. Where I was like you know I kind of want to read something that relates to me now.

Saj admitted he was completely comfortable in school reading books with queer content. He said, “I mean, I guess I was already sort of a weird kid in general, so I guess I just was used to it. I mean, I honestly felt more awkward about reviewing *Twilight* than I did reviewing any book with queer content.” When asked whether his teachers created an open space for students to read whatever they wanted and push the literary boundaries of the canon in class, Saj reflected:

I think it was me. Definitely me. I mean, teachers made no effort in any way. Later on in high school when I was doing like AP Literature type stuff and she gave a general list of books. I don’t recall there being a selection with queer characters. But in general, I would just try to navigate toward books that seemed like they might have had something interesting potentially. And if they didn’t, I would be disappointed.

Saj continued to navigate his high school experiences by listening and looking to ally teachers in his school, while still critically examining what he was being taught and supplementing his own interests through the process. He did recount spaces that teachers offered
students during these years to critically examine the world around them through their subject matter:

I know my teachers were kind of liberal in that regard. I had one of those really liberal, kind of hippy literature type teachers. So, she loved it. We could have discussions about anything. I even remember us having a discussion about Orson Scott Card and his whole *Ender’s Game* and the whole homophobia thing. And she was like, *Oh wow!* She didn’t know about it, so it was actually news to her at the time. That was probably the most…probably the *only* experience I remember relating to books and queer issues with my teacher.

Yet when asked if he felt comfortable sharing questions about gender or sexual orientation with teachers or adults in his school, he reflected:

Not likely. There’s some instructors or teachers who I was close to, but as far as me going to them about any issues regarding my gender or my sexuality, no. I would have never made that step, I don’t think.

Saj did have an outlet to peripherally address queer issues in high school with a group of friends. He recounted:

Oh yeah—with my friends. Like, my friends who were hinting at but didn’t come out until later that they were whatever. We were kind of the creative sort. We would kind of draw and write and stuff. A lot of the times when we were bored in class, we would sort of note role-play things. We would just make random characters and it wasn’t really uncommon for us to have queer characters in our stories.

When asked what support he had in school to help him develop his sense of self, Saj noted nothing in the institutional space of school…just friends. He said, “I mean, the occasional, random person, but nothing in school itself.” It is noteworthy that Saj was not necessarily out to any of these friends, but was instead in a group of like-minded, accepting people where he felt comfortable. He spoke to this when he stated, “I never really sort of hinted at or even sort of came out to my friends in any regard, at least at that time. But I mean, we were pretty comfortable with just talking about anything like that.”
When asked whether he felt that his interactions with queer content and contributions in middle and high school positively or negatively influenced his understanding of self, Saj explained:

Overall, I would say it probably had a negative impact, because it took me a little longer. I think that if I had been exposed to more ideas about, like, bisexuality and all that, I would have more comfortable with the idea of—okay, maybe that is what I fit in. But, since it never came up, in the sort of historical context, like, was in the history books and English books—even though it was there, we just never talked about it. If I had not had the initiative to go do it myself, I can’t imagine how much longer it would have taken me. And I would also go so far as to say that it might be negative because part of the reason we had the drive was because, in some way, we do, at least in some way, identify as LGBT. But, students who are straight and cisgender, they’re not going to be knowledgeable about these issues at all.

This passage profoundly encompasses some of the complexities of growing up as a queer or questioning adolescent. Saj assuredly took on these messages from school (and society) as a middle and high school student. When asked how these messages informed his understanding of self, as a student and as a whole human being, he simply said:

There was no way in the world that I would consider coming out in my secondary schooling. Yeah. And as a person who at the time, kind of took some pride in being a weird kid, that was a line for me. (laughter) Definitely a line.

This line was not one that was worth crossing for Saj, based on all of the messages and implications he was receiving about being a queer person during adolescence. Finally, when asked what was the largest contributing factor to him successfully navigating his middle and high school experiences, Saj simply said, “The ambition to get out.”

**Participant: Jeremy**

Jeremy is a Caucasian 33-year-old male who grew up in a rural community in Alabama. He graduated from high school in 1998, self-identifies as gay, and came out when he was 17 years old—making him one of only three participants to have been out of the closet while in secondary school. Jeremy graduated from a small, public high school (grades 7-12) in a rural
setting, and represents the participant who matriculated secondary school earlier than any other participant.

**Textural Description**

Jeremy’s story is unique to this study because, according to him, he was the first person to ever come out while attending his small high school. He did not have access to a group or space in his school during these years, including a lack of access to online spaces because he graduated high school in 1998. Nor did Jeremy have other classmates, friends, or teachers who identified as queer during his adolescence. When asked about queer teachers or faculty in his school, Jeremy replied, “No. I don’t think they would have lasted in school, you know? It’s sad. However, he was out to friends and family which did provide him a level of support during these years.

When asked whether he received instruction at school on issues of bigotry, like racism or sexism, Jeremy recalled that it was “somewhat, subtlety” discussed, as he recounted:

> I remember a history teacher in high school that kind of did, but he also approached it from a very right-wing, conservative standpoint. So, I still couldn’t identify, you know? I can kind of identify with what he was saying, but at the same time, I could tell there was a conflict.

Assuredly, homophobia was never addressed in Jeremy’s middle or high school experiences, as he synthesized, “No. It was just like a word you didn’t say, you know?” Additionally, Jeremy reported never receiving any direct instruction on queer content or contributions in his secondary school experiences through any of his coursework. When asked about interactions with sex education in school, Jeremy remembered it all being “heterosexually-based”. Jeremy enjoyed reading classics such as Shakespeare, *Canterbury Tales*, and Charles Dickens during these years and did not report interacting with any queer literature during adolescence.
Jeremy did recount having a supportive school environment in which to thrive during middle and high school. He said:

I do feel like the staff did a good job. You know, if you felt that you were bullied, you know, something wasn’t right, you could go to someone and talk. So, that was a good thing. And I think that’s a plus of going to a small school, too. You know, everyone kind of knows everyone.

When asked whether both his middle and high school environments were safe for queer or questioning students or faculty, Jeremy reflected:

I do. I don’t feel like they would let anybody bully me. But, at the same time, they wouldn’t understand where I was coming from. You know? So, I don’t think they would have just let people beat me up. But still, not having anyone to relate to is still kind of difficult.

Another space that Jeremy found in high school to fit in was through his school’s band program, as he recounted, “I was in band my entire middle school and high school. I felt safe there. But, I’ve always been more comfortable around, you know, girls…women. So, I mean, that was kind of like my getaway. I felt safe there.”

Because Jeremy did not have access to positive representations of queer identity or issues through schooling and this was a time before the prevalence of the Internet, he relied specifically on media and music to provide him with any knowledge or context for what he was feeling. He spoke to this as he recounted:

You kind of grow up that way, you know, when you’re the only person…I had no known gay relatives…nothing. I mean, it’s just me. And the closest people I had was, like, Madonna. (laughter) And Princess Diana. I mean, that’s it! And, you know, you just kind of have to be tough and do what you have to do. It would have to be through TV or music. I don’t know what I would have done seriously without music. That was my only outlet. I remember the first time we got cable. Cause I grew up in the 80’s and we had a television with three channels. And when we first got cable, I thought, Wow! This is the best thing ever. And I remember MTV came on and I remember the season of The Real World with Pedro. That was my first real exposure. And I can tell you everything that happened that season. It’s just in my brain, you know, all these years later. And really, between that and, like I said, Madonna’s music and Princess Diana. There’s just
something about her that I was just so fascinated. Definitely. I don’t know what I would have done, seriously, without that.

Jeremy’s connections to Madonna, Princess Diana, and Pedro on *The Real World* as “the closest people” he had access to during his middle and high school years to help him understand questions of gender or sexual orientation is significant. This story illustrates an example of queer youth seeking to fill the void of positive representations of queer identities during adolescence through whatever channels or means are available to them.

*Structural Description*

Being the only out person in his small town high school certainly impacted Jeremy’s development and sense of self. He said, “There was no one I could identify with and feel close to. I just felt completely isolated. It was tough. It really was.” Notably, Jeremy was the only participant whose coming out story organically came about during data collection. He recounted:

> It’s kind of funny how that happened to me. I was 17. Back then, a local radio station had a chat line that you could call and setup dating profiles and stuff. (*laughter*) I called and I was 17 and I lied and said I was 18, cause you had to be 18. Cause I just wanted to listen to the profile and meet some people. And I met a guy. And, you know, when you first start dating someone…your first love, you know, it’s kind of hard to keep it a secret. So, I remember talking to him on the phone one night and my mom picked up the phone, you know, and she was listening in on our conversation. Of course, I was so upset. But, you know, she wasn’t really…I mean, I’m sure she kind of knew. You know, mothers know.

While he was not out to a large group of friends at school during these years, Jeremy did recount how this process evolved as he matriculated high school and he became the one to educate others about queer identities. He said:

> I had no queer friends, so to speak. But, you know, my senior year of high school I do remember talking with some of my close friends about, you know…cause they had questions that they wanted to know…they didn’t understand. And, you know, I could talk to them.
While Jeremy did feel comfortable sharing personal issues with close friends and family during these years, he indicated that he did not feel that he could address these questions or issues to teachers or adults at school, as he responded, “No. Not at the school. No.” Yet, when asked whether he would have been comfortable reading a book with queer content at school, Jeremy relayed:

Yes, I think I would. Yeah. I think just, you know, I’ve always been the type that I just kind of do what I feel is right. And I don’t try to push anybody, but, you know, if that’s what I want to do, then that’s what I’ll do. You know?

This dynamic of doing what you want to do and doing what you feel is right despite the lack of transparent support in the school environment certainly impacted Jeremy’s understanding of self. When asked whether his interactions with queer content and contributions in secondary school positively or negatively impacted his understanding of self, Jeremy replied, “Well, in the end, it kind of positively affected me. I guess it was negative at the time, but in the long-run it turned into a positive.” When asked to elaborate, Jeremy went on to state:

You know, at the time, you feel all alone and you have nothing. It’s like being in a foreign land. There’s nothing. It’s so weird. And then, I think that in turn makes you a stronger person. And now, as an adult, that’s helped me a lot. It’s helped me to be a stronger person and to love myself, I guess you would say. You know? So, I guess that was, maybe, for the best. I don’t know. I wouldn’t go back. (laughter) Definitely. But, I just don’t think I could look at them in a positive way though. Cause, how many other people were affected? And how many other people maybe didn’t grow like I did? You know…how many people are still suppressing all that?

Jeremy recalled the support he did receive during adolescence to help him develop his sense of self, stemming from his home and his community and not from his school. He did admit, “Well, I did have teachers try to show us the right way to do things. You know, basics I guess you would say. Study…don’t cheat…you know, that kind of thing. But, as far as getting deep into the personality-no.”
Jeremy described some of the largest contributing factors to him successfully navigating through his middle and high school experiences as an openly queer student as he stated, “It would have to be my family. You know? And music and TV. I seriously don’t know what I would have done. That’s kind of scary to think about, actually.” When asked about the messages he received about himself as a student and as a whole human being through his secondary school experiences, Jeremy thoughtfully reflected:

*I definitely learned that I can do something if I put my mind to it. And, you know, I can do something by myself. I don’t have to have the world helping me or telling me what to do. I can be my own person. You know, it’s not easy. But, it can be done. That’s probably the biggest lesson. I think that was just true for me. Cause I felt like everybody else was in a herd-you know, like a herd of sheep. And here I am the black sheep over here just hanging out, you know? Or should I say the rainbow sheep? (laughter)*

Jeremy continued to describe how feeling like a rainbow sheep outside of the herd during adolescence has affected his understanding of self:

*Those years-middle school and high school-are so critical. Oh, they’re so critical. And even now, at 33, you know, my social skills are not what I would like for them to be. Because, I missed out on all those years. I didn’t have anyone to relate to. And I still feel kind of out of place a lot of times here. You know? And at first, I thought it was the age thing, but no, I don’t think it is. Because there are a lot of students in their 30’s. It’s just really tough.*

This point clearly shows that the effects of the erasure of queer identities and the lack of support structures available to queer or questioning youth have consequences in adolescence and beyond in complex ways.

**Participant: Owen**

Owen is a Caucasian 19-year-old who identifies as genderqueer and grew up in a rural community in Alabama. Graduating high school in 2013 from a large, public high school in a rural setting, Owen represents the participant who most recently matriculated secondary school. Owen self-identifies as panromantic asexual and came out at age 18.
**Textural Description**

Being the only participant who identifies as both genderqueer and panromantic asexual makes the experiences and perspectives Owen brought to this study unique. Owen reported having no access to a queer-friendly space or group either in school or while growing up in a rural community. However, information on queer content was actively sought out during adolescence through a number of means, as Owen described, “The Internet. Some books, which, for me, was later on in high school. I think music also cause I definitely got into a lot of queer artists.”

When asked whether any friends or classmates were out during middle or high school, Owen recounted, “Yes. Yeah, I knew a few. It was more amongst friends. There were some people that were public knowledge, yeah.” Owen reported that “most of the out people in my high school were involved in band or choir. So, I guess there was more a possible community. I mean, it was a very loose-knit community. It was more like, ‘Hey-hey, you’re here!’” But when asked if any teachers or faculty were out, Owen surmised, “No. That would have been frowned upon in [my high school].” Owen was one of the few participants who reported experiencing positive instruction around bigotry from at least one teacher, while also acknowledging feeling other teachers were being harmful in their curricular choices and instruction. Owen elaborated on this:

I did have one teacher who was actually on the Civil Rights Association of Alabama (I may have that name wrong.) She was great. She definitely addressed sexism and racism and homophobia. Just strictly homophobia though-there wasn’t any sort of transphobia-anything outside what you hear in the mainstream. And then there were other teachers who sort of touched on that. There were other teachers who were blatantly racist and…tried to say they weren’t racists. You know, that whole deal. And there were some teachers who were, like, tried to be feminists, but were terrible at it and were actually more harmful than they were helpful. So, yeah, that’s how that worked. Most were awful.
Owen again brought up these teachers when asked if instruction or discussions in school about homophobia ever occurred in middle or high school. Owen recalled, “Yeah-the one who tried to be a feminist. And the one who was in the Civil Rights Association board. They both tried pretty hard to, like, when they saw it, they addressed it and otherwise.” Owen said discussions of homophobia by teachers were more about intervening when kids would bully each other in class and not specifically about homophobia as a factor in society. When asked if students were respectful and how they responded to these teachers attempting to address homophobic slurs/bullying in their classrooms, Owen responded, “Typically not. Typically, they were like, stop preaching at me. That sort of angry reaction.”

Owen characterized their middle school environment as most assuredly unsafe for queer or questioning students or faculty. He elaborated on this with a personal example:

My brother did go to a different middle school and he eventually transferred over to my middle school. And I hate to speak for his experience, but we always sort of dressed different from everyone, as you can probably tell right here. And so, in 7th grade, a bunch of kids started calling him gay and everything. And he got so stressed out that he had to transfer middle schools. But, the middle schools where I come from aren’t safe for anybody.

When asked if high school was any different in terms of safety for queer of questioning students or faculty, Owen responded:

Yeah-it was a little safer. I mean, there was never any violent episodes at my school. But like, then again, not a lot of people were out. There was like a few…there was one couple I can think of and just a few single, independent people. But, the climate did get a little better. Just because as LGBTQ stuff got into the news and everything and it was more easy to talk about…not easy to talk about, but easier to talk about as people were growing up and realizing-Hey, we’re being pretty terrible. It just got a little better, but still, there would be those off-hand comments like, There’s no such thing as bisexuality or like, Gaaaay!!
Again, this is significant because Owen represents the participant in this study who matriculated high school most recently, at a time where tremendous strides were being made in queer rights throughout the U.S. and globally.

Perhaps due to the time period in which Owen graduated high school, this was the only participant in the study to have direct instruction on queer topics in secondary school, albeit not very well presented by a history teacher, as Owen recounted:

My history teacher was…he was terrible. He was a good teacher, but he was a terrible person. And so, when we got to the Stonewall Riots, it was just like-this happened. Let’s skip over it without going into anything. It as just like, These gay people did this. That’s, like verbatim-Gay people did this.

When asked how classmates responded to this instructive moment in his history classroom, Owen said, “Ah-sweating and looking away. I think it was more like, this is uncomfortable to hear about. I thought it was great. I loved hearing about it.” Despite this being the only mention of queer identities or context received directly in school, Owen still managed to seek out information on their own while in school or using the textbooks as recounted:

And sometimes in literature classes, there would be footnotes on authors’ sexualities, but nothing more than a footnote. So, I did get to read about it in the books and everything and, like, research it otherwise, but I never got it in school.

This impetus to seek out knowledge and creatively be in the world was certainly instilled in Owen through family, among other factors. Owen was the only participant to have read queer young adult literature during adolescence (The Perks of Being a Wallflower) and also reported reading adult literature with queer content during these years as well, like Oscar Wilde and Haruki Murakami. Genres and authors that interested Owen during adolescence included fantasy books in middle school and early high school like Wheel of Time and Game of Thrones and eventually classic literature like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Dostoyevsky, and “a Camus phase…I read a lot of Camus.” When asked how Owen found out about book interests or queer content
during these years, it was recounted, “Either through the Internet or just stumbling upon them. Finding them and then just doing research for similar books. There were no, like, ‘Hey, here you go…you might like this book.’ No, there was nothing like that.”

**Structural Description**

Owen was exploring and understanding an asexual panromantic, demisexual orientation to the world during high school, but did not identify as genderqueer until after graduating. An outlet for Owen during adolescence was the small group of friends and classmates and their discussions within which support was found, although “even with friends, it was also sort of limited sometimes.” Owen went on to describe these limits and experiencing feelings of misunderstanding:

There was like a little bit of discussion. Luckily I had a pretty good group of friends who understood that it was a terrible environment for queer kids. I didn’t actually publically come out in high school. I came out here [in college]. And friends that I had back then know. But, I identify as demisexual/asexual. So, like, when I started realizing I was asexual, I did mention that, cause I didn’t really feel like I needed to come out for that. It was more just like, I don’t experience sexual attraction the same way you do. But, it was just sort of like, *Oh, you’ll meet the right person someday. It’s like, you just need more time. It’s okay—don’t worry.* It was that sort of stuff. And people recanted for that. They apologized for that.

When asked about the level of comfort addressing questions of gender or sexual orientation with teachers in school, Owen responded:

*Uhmm-no. No, I wouldn’t. It was, I mean, a small town in Alabama. So, it’s probably going to be frowned upon. But, I didn’t really have teachers that I could have, like, bonds with in the first place. So, it’s like, yeah it was of more like a come here, learn and leave, type of deal.*

Although there were no adults in school directly approachable about feelings or issues regarding gender or sexual orientation as a queer/questioning student, Owen did have good connections and experiences with some teachers at school, as recounted:
Towards the latter years, typically because my literature teachers were…they were, like okay. They were more socially aware. First of all, I could actually go talk to them. And they were more friendly, I just felt. And, I don’t know, I just felt like…I didn’t know if they were actually socially aware or if it was something I guessed because they were sort of nice around the ward. Which, I may have been totally wrong on the whole socially aware thing, but…yeah, I felt safer. But, sophomore year of high school down to middle school-no. Not at all.

Owen was asked in the focus group to describe whether interactions with queer content and contributions in middle and high school had a positive or negative influence on understanding of self. Piggybacking off Saj’s comment’s (the only other non-cisgender participant in the study), Owen reported that it was an overall negative influence, but one that also sparked a drive to seek out knowledge and a better understanding identity, as described below:

It sort of defined limits for stuff. Because it was always in definitions of gay and lesbian as opposed to, like, bisexuality…pansexuality…trans* identity. If I didn’t have the drive to do it myself, then I wouldn’t have gone past that and I would have been trapped in a box.

Overall, the messages that received in secondary school experiences about being a student and a whole human being were not positive: “You just kind of felt dehumanized, I guess, cause you were never talked about. Or, when you were talked about, it was always, like, Othered…these Others did this.” Owen specifically went on to discuss this interplay as a non-cisgender individual: “Especially for, like differing identities such as, you know, different from gay and lesbian. Because less people would understand being panromantic, asexual. They’d just be like, what?? That sounds like a word salad-what are you talking about?” Although Owen is a highly articulate, creative, and dynamic individual and student now, it was reported that “just, sort of, wanting to leave as soon as possible” was the largest contributing factor for successfully navigating the secondary school experience.
Participant: Megan

Megan is a White 22-year-old female who grew up in an urban community in Alabama. She graduated from high school in 2010, self-identifies as bisexual, and came out when she was 19 years old. Megan graduated from a large, public high school in an urban setting.

Textural Description

Because Megan attended a public, secondary school that focused on performing arts, her contributions offer a unique perspective to this study. She grew up in a more urban setting where the school system was in the process of desegregating their schools and rezoning meant new populations of students in her community. When asked whether she would call her middle school environment safe for queer or questioning students or faculty, Megan thoughtfully responded:

I wouldn’t go so far as to say it was dangerous. But, not necessarily safe either. I don’t want to say that it’s safe… and I also don’t want to say that it’s unsafe. It just depends on…I think it would really depend on how open you were about it. Like, if people just knew, and you identified and you didn’t ever really talk about it…people just knew, you would probably be safe. But, if you ever acted out-like, if you held hands with another guy in school-if the wrong person saw you doing that, you might become unsafe. So, it really just depends on the situation and how open you are about it and how in-their-face other people feel by your actions. There’s definitely a way to feel safe. But, you shouldn’t have to find a way to feel safe.

This is interesting because Megan was the only participant who explicitly discussed having and acting on same-sex relationships at the middle school level. This idea of staying in line in order to stay protected continued into high school, as Megan detailed the safety for queer or questioning students or faculty in her high school environment:

I went to a public high school. So, I think it might have been less safe, even more so than middle school. Because middle school was really vicious, but the environment was really, kind of free-for-all. When I went to a public high school, it was 3,000 students. So, all the rules were very strict to keep everyone in line. And so, I think because our school was so big, that you probably could have gone under the radar a lot more. Just because it was so big that you couldn’t really have cliques. But, that being said, flying
under the radar would entail not expressing yourself at school. So, it was a little bit more of a hostile environment. I don’t think anyone would have attacked you. But, there definitely would have been glares and shut-outs and you not getting let into certain clubs or organizations or certain teachers grading your harsher than others.

When asked if she had access in her school to a group or space that addressed queer issues, Megan responded:

Definitely not. And I feel like there should have been. Really big, you know, fairly liberal city for Alabama and went to a performing arts high as well. And even in downtown, liberal, performing arts, there wasn’t really a space for people. I mean, we definitely had gay and lesbian students, but it wasn’t really addressed by the faculty. No.

This is somewhat surprising because Megan lived in a more urban community and also attended a school that specialized in performing arts. Megan also expressed that she did not have access to a space or group that addressed queer identities in her community as well, as she described, “Definitely not. I was a big church kid in middle school and high school. So, I didn’t even come out till I was 19 cause I didn’t have anyone around me that was supportive of a non-heterosexual lifestyle.”

Megan reported having sexual experiences and relationships with females during adolescence, but did not come out until age 19, after she graduated high school. She said, “I mean, I questioned myself a lot. And I had female relations in middle school. And then as soon as it became a thing that I had to mix with the church, I just shoved it back under.” When asked to elaborate on other queer students or friends during adolescence, Megan replied:

The only one that I can really recall, I had two classmates in high school-two females-that dated all through high school. And then the only other one that I can think of that was open was my friend who I had known since sixth grade. He finally came out as gay our senior year of high school. But, no one else. Not myself or any of the females I had relations with were openly out.

When asked how her school received the openly queer students during this time period, Megan recounted:
Because a lot of us weren’t out, we were just kind of largely overlooked. Although there was one instance where the two females who dated (and they were out) were kissing before class-like, out on the front lawn. And an old, White lady administrator promptly ran out and was like, *Don’t do that!* Not to say they wouldn’t have done that for a straight couple that was groping each other in public. But, I feel that the response time was a lot faster because it was a lesbian couple.

Megan relayed that there were no queer teachers or adults from her secondary school experiences, but did recall a drama teacher who was supposedly gay, but never verbally confirmed this with students.

Megan did receive instruction from her teachers on bigotry, as she explained: Definitely in history class, we touched on the subject of sexism and classism. Very briefly in my American history class we touched on racism. And it was only when we were talking about slavery in the South. I don’t think we ever talked about anything in the way of gender expression or anything like that. It felt like they only brought it up when they knew somebody was, like we were going to ask questions about why couldn’t women own property and what about the serf system. They would just sort of preemptively answer that question because they knew we were going to ask.

Although Megan expressed a positive interaction with bigotry in her secondary schooling, she did not have any teachers directly address homophobia in the classroom. When asked if her teachers addressed homophobia through interventions to bullying, name-calling, or teasing amongst students, Megan recalled an example:

Normally. I mean, there were a few cases where-one thing that sticks out to mind is in sixth grade history class, my friend, I mean, he didn’t come out until senior year. He was picked on a lot in our history class in sixth grade. And, some of the slurs were people thinking he was gay. But our teacher, she…she wouldn’t really intervene on his behalf. Not because I think she was homophobic, but because he was not one of her best students. And she definitely intervened less when he was publically picked on. And, I don’t think anyone ever called him a faggot in class, but I definitely know that he had been called that outside of class within earshot of her and nothing happened.

When asked whether she had representations of queer identities or content presented to her in middle or high school, Megan responded, “I don’t think I ever heard of a gay pride anything until college.” She went on to describe how it was never positively portrayed in classes or through teachers, but did come up sometimes on the periphery, “I mean, there were a few like,
oh, wasn’t Emily Dickinson a lesbian? And everyone would laugh. But nothing…I can’t think of anyone whose sexuality was brought up for more than just a passing joke by a student.”

Within her performing arts high school, Megan did report finding some safe spaces, particularly in the music/arts departments, but none that were specifically queer-inclusive. She explained:

It was just more a *Come as you are* type thing. So, it was never, like, put out there on a platter, like, *This is good and this is positive and this is okay*. It was more that no expression is wrong, type thing.

Megan also specifically recounted her interactions with sex education in school, “All of my sex education in middle and high school dealt with heterosexual couples. I don’t think anything other than heteronormative sex was ever brought into our sex education classes. As the norm.”

Although Megan did not come out until after graduating high school, she still engaged in same-sex relationships during this time and was seeking out information on queer topics during this time, mostly on her own. When asked where she received information about queer issues during adolescence, Megan responded:

Definitely, mostly the Internet. I got a computer in my room when I was in 6th grade. But, that was definitely the bulk of my experience was just the Internet. And people who you found out through hanging out with them that they were different. And one of you would be brave and say it…or hint at it. And then they would share with you resources. But, none of those resources ever came from an institutional environment.

Megan was not particularly interested in young adult literature during middle or high school because, according to her, it was all “heterosexual, guy meets girl, sweeps her off her feet type deal.” Some of Megan’s reading interests during these years revolve around fantasy, sci-fi, and horror (particularly influenced by her father). However, through her Internet searches for information, Megan discovered fan-fiction and other interests during this time, as she described:

Fan-fiction is a whole different topic *(laughs)*. I definitely-more in middle school when I was very first exploring the idea of being with women, there was a lot of…there was a lot of *Harry Potter* fan fiction online. Lots of Hermione/Ginny type stuff going on *(laughs)*. And I had seen pornographic material when I was younger. But it was all heterosexual
and I didn’t really...to this day I don’t really like hetero porn. It just doesn’t do anything for me. Things that were not geared toward my age group—yes, I consumed. But nothing that my parents would have found appropriate.

When asked how she found out about books, information, or fan-fiction that she liked during these years, Megan reinforced the emphasis on the Internet, as well as friends, as she replied:

Internet. Talking with friends. Two of my friends who were girls were very into fan-fiction and into writing fan-fiction. So, they sort of got me into that realm of things. When we first got satellite cable, I was in sixth grade. And I think they accidentally put a pornographic channel on, and I was just like, what the fuck is this? (laughter) And I just kind of sat there and watched it and I wasn’t turned on by it or anything—I was twelve. But I was like, what is going on right now? (laughs) I’m so confused. I mean, I know they’re having sex, but why is this on television? That channel did not last very long. But then, I knew what to look for after that.

Interestingly, Megan knew as she was consuming books and information during these years that while she enjoyed the content, something was missing. According to her, “Cause there weren’t really queer relationships in the things that I enjoyed reading. But I found them in other places that pertained to the things that I enjoyed. Just not necessarily in the original writing.” This journey took Megan to the realm of fan-fiction to seek out queer spaces within genres/texts that she already enjoyed. But more importantly, this also led Megan to write her own novels during these years as a way to put her own perspective and focus on the story in a new and original way.

**Structural Description**

Megan is a dynamic presence today and she possesses a true activist stance toward equality in society, although she did admit to being a “very, very introverted and nerdy child in middle school.” She also spoke to the impact of growing up in a church on her development, as she said, “I mean, I questioned myself a lot. And I had female relations in middle school. And then as soon as it became a thing that I had to mix with the church, I just shoved it back under.”

When asked whether the interactions she had with queer content or contributions in school positively or negatively influenced her understanding of self, Megan explained:
I would definitely say negatively. Not even just in school, but I think a lack of representation in school really made finding myself even outside of school even harder. I came out my first time to one of my cousins. I brought her up to my tree house. I said, *Okay, I want to tell you a secret. I trust you and I want to let you know that I think I’m different because I like girls.* And I totally trusted her with this information. About a week later, her mother (my aunt) came up to our house and just really nastily told me, *My daughter told me what you said. And if you ever talk to her again, I’m going to tell your mother.* So, that experience pretty much scared me away from telling anyone about anything for a really long time. And if I would have had any kind of positive influence...because at that age, you get home and you get school. And you don’t really get much else. And both of those were telling me: keep this a secret. Don’t try to act out on this. So, if the school can have a way [to] make sure that no matter what’s going on at home, or what they’re being told by their classmates, that there’s at least a little bit of positive influence about being who you are and speaking out and not being afraid of threats (like I’m going to tell your mother). I would have had a lot easier time in school if someone would have reached out to me and told me that that one instance didn’t mean that I was in trouble for how I felt, or something along those lines.

Indeed, the contradictory messages that Megan received at school and outside of school impacted Megan’s understanding of self during these years, particularly regarding gender and sexual orientation. When asked specifically about the messages she received about herself as a student and as a whole human being through her secondary school experiences, Megan said:

I think, especially going to a performing arts school in the South, that message was very mixed. I think that the message was largely: you can be different and you can be who you are, within the confines of this. So, my dance instructor. If you listened to crazy music and you liked to have weird hair and your dance style was really artsy and different and didn’t go with the flow, that was okay. But, if you were queer or if you liked anime and manga, or if you, you know, listened to the wrong type of weird music, like metal-stuff that wasn’t considered artsy different-those were the kinds of things that specifically were not okay within the confines of being different and being yourself and self-expression. There’s a very indirect message of: there are limits to how different you can be.

Again, Megan’s experience is unique because she attended a performing arts high school, where presumably the culture of the staff and students would be a bit more open and fluid. However, Megan illustrated that the marginalized kids were aware of these unspoken school rules, understood how these rules impacted Others, and looked for ways that faculty enforced the rules:
The norm was a little bit broader than it was in a public school. But there were still definite boundaries that you didn’t cross. And one of those was being flamboyantly queer. So, I mean, no one ever said to me, Hey, I know your secret. And you’re in a lot of trouble. They never approached me directly to tell me that it was wrong. But, I feared that if I would have been openly-gay with my girlfriends at that time, that I would have been treated differently.

Megan recalled Other students also being treated differently at her school, as she recounted:

One of my best friends who was a girl, she was very into anime and manga and she was very quiet, very shy. She was African American. And she was just a very different kind of person. And you could tell that she didn’t receive the same attention as the rest of the students. I mean, all of the students would make fun of her. And then the teacher would very indirectly...not something that you could, maybe, document as harassment or unfair. Just kind of the brush-off treatment or not answering something that they asked in a complete way that she might have answered to, say, another student who fell under the social norms. And you could kind of tell that teachers were very annoyed by her sometimes because they thought she was on a different planet or something. She just wasn’t all there in the way that they expected her to be. And so, you could tell that they were very annoyed and displaced by it-just from their demeanor would switch at the drop of the hat when talking to a straight-laced student to when they were talking to her or to myself or to someone. I had a friend who was in that same friend group and had really bad anxiety issues. She was also very shy and it was very easy to make her cry. She had a hard time in social situations. I don’t think she ever identified as queer or gay or bisexual or exploring. But, even she still was just not shown the same respect as the rest of the students were shown.

A further illustration of the ways in which Megan (and her peers) had to navigate these rules revolved around reading texts with queer themes in school. When asked if she would have felt comfortable reading a book with queer content during middle or high school, Megan replied:

Oh, no. I don’t think that would have been. I would have been made fun of for presenting something of that subject matter. They probably would have called my parents and said, Hey-do you know your daughter’s reading about lesbians? And I think your daughter might be gay. What’s going on here? So, I would have felt comfortable reading it on my own time, but I wouldn’t have felt comfortable having it out in school or doing any sort of academic report on it.

Megan did speak to the support networks she had during adolescence, including some teachers she considered allies. She specifically recalled her arts-oriented teachers, some English teachers, and an “open-minded” computer teacher in eighth grade who created an enriching, safe
space for his students and was “very supportive of everyone in a general sense in the class environment.” Megan also mentioned other specific teachers that offered her support during these years:

The English teacher, she was kind of stern, but she was very open and nice to students who she knew worked hard. So, I definitely felt more welcomed by her because I had this overachiever thing. So, she knew that I was going to do my work and she was always very cordial and sweet to me. And my art teacher-she definitely was really out there and really was like open to everyone. I’m pretty sure she was high most of the time she was teaching, so… (laughs) She made us feel that—especially because we were in an art space—for everyone to be open to expressing themselves. Most of my other teachers…I wouldn’t have talked to them. One, because they made it very clear: I’m the teacher…you’re the student. This is a…you know, don’t get friendly with me. And also because a lot of them, especially the administrators, were very, very reserved and religious.

Even though these teachers never directly addressed homosexuality or homophobia in their classrooms, Megan still felt a sense of respect, trust, and support through these teachers, as she explained:

Just being there and being supportive and having a smile on their face all the time and not, kind of, adding onto the pile of shit that you’re getting from everywhere else was the biggest thing. And it seems like it’s not that big of a deal, unless you’re in that situation and that smile everyday or that Hey, how are you doing? or That research report you did was very good-those little things were the only things that were positively impacting me at all.

To illustrate her level of support and respect for these teachers, Megan reported that she would have felt comfortable talking to “two or three teachers throughout the span of middle and high school” about questions she had about gender or sexual orientation.

Other means of support for Megan during her secondary school experiences revolve around friends, although this was tenuous, as she described:

Only with the females I had relationships with and with my [gay male] friend. And even in private, my friend denied being gay up until he started dating his first boyfriend. So, it was a We’re going to talk about it and it’s going to be a secret or I’m going to deny it, kind of thing. I feel like we could have come together more to support each other, but I was not…there was not an absence of queer friendship in my life when I was younger.
Megan’s journey through adolescence and her secondary school experiences assuredly helped her define who she is, but this time was also full of discontent and depression. When asked what was the largest contributing factor to her successfully navigating her way through these experiences, Megan thoughtfully reflected:

I honestly don’t think there was one. I had a lot of problems with depression and suicide in middle school and high school. And, I think the most successful factor was me just not knowing how to kill myself the right way. *(laughs)* I just didn’t do it right. And that was the only thing that really got me through things. I was too naïve to know how to really hurt myself. There wasn’t really anything-any guidance, any…Even having stuff online and having people who were also in the closet that you knew about-it didn’t make things hurt any less. So, I don’t think there was any one thing that sticks out to me and I can say, *Oh yeah, that one thing really got me through the day.*

While Megan’s resolve and resilience ultimately helped her make it through adolescence, her reflection on her suicidal tendencies is illustrative of the countless number of queer or questioning youth who negotiate these feelings on a daily basis due to the oppression in their lives.

**Participant: Loki**

Loki is a White 23-year-old who is questioning their gender, grew up in a suburban community in the southeast U.S., and graduated high school in 2009. On Loki’s demographic questionnaire for sexual orientation, “Other” was selected and 20 was the age Loki indicated coming out. Loki graduated from a medium-sized, single-sex (female), parochial (Catholic) high school in a suburban setting.

**Textural Description**

Although Loki grew up in an urban community in the southeast U.S., she continually reinforced the oppression she experienced while attending her Catholic middle and high school.
When asked if these school experiences offered a space or group specifically for queer or questioning students, Loki replied:

Definitely not. It was actually against the rules in our school. I went to Catholic school. I guess it was policy or something. I don’t know…maybe there’s one now, because I haven’t really kept in touch with them. Not when I was in school-definitely not. It was very White, middle class, like suburban New Orleans-Catholic school. The only groups they had would be like Eucharistic minister group or…I mean, I was in the marching band. We were the minority in our school. There was no space for people who felt, like, different in any way at all. So they usually just joined other groups like art club or band or choir or something.

Growing up in an urban community, Loki would presumably have had access to a space or group for queer or questioning identities during adolescence. However, when asked, Loki responded:

[My home city] is pretty liberal, one might say. And I realize now that there are a lot of resources but not ones that I was able to find in high school. And in middle school it wasn’t a thing that I tried to look for. And I would assume that there are even fewer available for people of that age. I never walked by something and was like, Oh my God, that’s what I need to be a group member of. There was literally nothing. I lived in the suburbs, so it was kind of like typical conservative Southern suburbs.

Although Loki did not come out until after graduating high school, I asked if there were other students or friends during these years who identified as queer. Loki responded:

Not until I was a junior in high school. I was friends with one of the girls from marching band who had dated other girls in our school and she was dating one of my friends. And it was like this big secret thing-you can’t tell people because you will get expelled or suspended. And then my senior year, she told me she was bisexual. And, I was like, well, that’s an interesting thing to be. And she was my first girl kiss, I guess (laughs). But that was really-I didn’t even get in touch with that, like, part of my sexuality until I was in college. Catholic school (laughs). It wasn’t until I was in college until it dawned on me, like, oh, this is okay to do. I can like females. They’re pretty (laughs). That’s okay. But in high school it was mostly like: this is taboo and my parents can never find out.

Loki reported no faculty or staff that identified as queer in her Catholic secondary school.
Because Loki attended a Catholic secondary school, I was interested in learning how
issues of bigotry or social justice were incorporated in curriculum and instruction. Loki
recounted a particularly problematic example to illustrate bigotry was addressed in high school:

Yeah. Well, we had religion classes and one of the classes was called social justice
where it seemed like they were trying really hard to expand our worldview, but it was a
religion class. And there was a particularly disgusting incident involving talking about
homosexuality in that class which just made me discount everything she said after that
(laughs). Yeah, she brought in a potted plant to class. And she said, Today, we’re going
to talk about homosexuality. And she ate the dirt and she said, Homosexuality is like
eating dirt. Why would you do that? Why would you choose to do that? And at the time
I wasn’t paying much attention because in religion class, I was mostly like not paying
attention. But some of the girls got up and left. And I didn’t realize what had happened
until after. But it turned out that it wasn’t even dirt—it was Oreo cookie crumbs and a fake
flower. So, she didn’t even eat the dirt. She wasn’t even that committed to it. (laughs).

When asked whether homophobia was ever addressed in school, Loki stated, “I don’t even think
I heard that word until I got out of high school. And I didn’t know what it meant.”

Loki reported that there was a dearth of information on queer topics and content during
middle and high school, recalling a heteronormative sex education course in elementary school
called “In God’s Image.” When asked about access to queer content or contributions in
secondary school, Loki responded:

If we learned about any queer writers or anything, that wasn’t what we focused on, unless
it was like Tennessee Williams or something like that. And that was in the book, that he
was gay. But it wasn’t something that we talked about. It was just like, that’s a fact.
We’re not studying that. We’re studying his writing.

When asked whether middle school was a safe environment for queer or questioning students or
faculty, Loki concluded:

I don’t feel like it was unsafe. I mean, there really wasn’t anyone, especially in middle
school, that seemed to identify that way. So, I don’t think that if I would have been in
touch with my own sexuality or personality in middle school that I would have felt safe
there. But, I think it was more to do with the fact that I didn’t like school. And I didn’t
want to be there, so I didn’t feel safe there generally. Like, physically safe, but not
eemotionally safe. I mean, when you go to a school where it’s just not brought up, there’s
no immediate threat. But there’s also no fostering of some sort of environment where
you feel like you can tell people things like that. It’s just kind of like, don’t ask/don’t tell. Basically, you just, kind of, don’t try.

Loki described how perceptions of safety for queer or questioning students or faculty changed for the high school environment:

I went to an all-girls school. It wasn’t like violence was a threat or anything like that. It was more that rumors would be spread about you and ruin your life…which happened to people all the time. I had a random freshman come up to me when I was senior and ask me if I was gay. I have no idea who she was or why she asked me that. People just did things like that and tried to badmouth each other. Which, that’s what girls do when you pack them into a tiny school together for many years. *(laughs)*

Loki was an avid reader during adolescence, but does not recall picking up much young adult literature during these years. She does remember some peripheral queer characters in some of the books she read, but nothing specifically with a queer theme or character as the central focus. Luckily, Loki’s mother fostered and supported this fascination with the written word, as described:

My mom never tried to censor anything I read. I used to read books about Wicca all the time and it freaked her out, but I would do it anyway. *(laughs)* Cause that was one of her rules-she didn’t like certain things that I read, but she didn’t ever tell me to put that book down because that’s not what she did.

Reading interests for Loki during adolescence revolved around fiction and fantasy/Manga in particular, although, “At the time, I probably would have read anything you handed me as long as it wasn’t about like math or science.”

**Structural Description**

Loki is still very much in a discovery phase in life, but possesses strong beliefs and an open spirit in which to explore and negotiate this process. Loki also reported not actively seeking out information on queer topics during adolescence, but rather was someone who was open to new ways of being and sought out nontraditional perspectives during this time period.
Speaking to this, Loki detailed how secondary school experiences limited not only the
development of a queer identity, but also a recognition of its existence:

No, not until I was older. Because it wasn’t until I was 20 that I even considered it. And it was like, okay then! (laughs) But before that, it was not a thing for me. It didn’t-it was like until I was like nineteen or twenty, it was just like that part of the world didn’t even exist. Like I saw things and I saw like parades and such. But, it was just oh, that’s a parade for gay people (laughs). Like, it wasn’t like, Oh, that’s intriguing and I’d like to participate in it. It was like oh, okay. I’m not one of those, so I’m…I’m not going (laughs).

This interplay of figuring out one’s place within the queer spectrum also struck Loki throughout our interviews and focus groups. Loki is currently in a polyamorous relationship with a trans* girlfriend. Identifying as “Other” sexual orientation and “Questioning” gender has certainly caused feelings of misunderstanding by others, as Loki detailed:

There’s only so much I can explain. I can’t even explain myself to myself. I can’t tell you my gender identity-I have no idea (laughs). It’s just, people here take you on face value a lot. So, most people here don’t know anything about me looking at me. Especially because of how I usually dress. It’s not like I always walk around wearing plaid. Although I do love a good plaid shirt. (laughs) It’s not practical to wear that all the time, when teaching especially. Like yesterday, I looked like a total dyke. And then today, I’m like, I think I’m going to wear a dress today (laughs). I always have that moment where I’m like, am I supposed to look a certain way when I’m going out? Do I need people to know that I’m gay (laughs)? Do I need women to know that I like them or am I just that weird girl who’s staring at them (laughs). It’s probably both.

When asked about the level of comfort addressing questions of gender or sexual orientation with adults in secondary school, Loki responded:

Not at all. (laughs) It’s like borderline amusing to me because it wasn’t even on the radar. And just because I was a really shy person, so I probably wouldn’t have talked to anyone, even if there was someone to talk to. But I probably would have been sent to counseling or something.

Loki went on to elaborate about the counseling process in her middle and high school:

It was like you only got sent to the counseling department in high school if you did something bad. For instance, we had this suicide awareness class. And at the end of the class, you could put someone’s name on a paper to indicate that you thought they were suicidal. And supposedly numerous people put my name on the paper. So I got sent to
the counseling office. And it wasn’t like a I’m reaching out to help you thing…it was like a Your name is on this paper, so you’re implicated in something. So, I did everything I could to freak out the counselor. I told her my favorite band was Black Sabbath (laughs). And then I was like no, I don’t want to kill myself-by! And it was like, if I was even seriously considering it, that wouldn’t have helped at all. I still don’t know who put my name on that paper (laughs).

This type of environment certainly impacted Loki’s development and overall sense of self as she navigated middle and high school. Reflecting back upon the teacher who “ate dirt” to illustrate homosexuality, Loki responded:

I hated school. I still don’t like it. I don’t know why I keep subjecting myself to it. But (laughs), that was like the, I don’t know, kind of like a wake up moment, where I’m like, ‘I’m sixteen years old and I’m listening to this bullshit from a woman who doesn’t know anything’ (laughs). It’s just stupid. But then she got her karma back later cause she was wearing white pants and got her period (laughs).

Loki also responded to the idea of reading a book with queer content in middle or high school:

No, I would have felt like someone would have found out. Like I used to read a lot of books on paganism and even now, I don’t feel comfortable reading them in public because it’s like stigma. But back then, I definitely wouldn’t have. I would have hidden it somewhere. Or I would have read it somewhere else. I would definitely have not read them on campus.

These stories illustrate that, even though Loki did not come out until after secondary school, an acknowledgment of school culture, rules, and heteronormativity that governed Loki’s adolescent years and development continue to play a role in Loki’s life.

When asked if the interactions with queer content or contributions in secondary school positively or negatively influenced understanding of self, Loki reflected:

I mean, I didn’t encounter anything. So, it was more like taking away possibilities. I never really knew who I was until I got into college (laughs). I think maybe that might have stifled that a little bit. I still don’t really know. I think I developed a more unique personality. I never felt like I had to be like anyone else cause I knew I that wasn’t. But I didn’t know what thing that I was. So, it didn’t make me want to fit in with anyone at all. But, yeah, I never really had, like, that moment where I was like, Oh, I can like women-that’s a cool thing to do and no one’s really gonna hurt me for it, I guess. But I didn’t think that until I was 19 or 20. Even though I already had, it was kind of just a, No-that’s not really a real thing. That doesn’t exist. Those aren’t real. (laughs) Lesbians
aren’t real. *(laughs)* Yeah, that’s pretty much how it was for me. Especially with the experience I had with my social justice teacher. After I realized what she had said and what had happened, it was like, I mentally just cut everyone off, kind of. Along that topic. It was something that I decided to never talk about. And in that way, I had more time to think about it myself. So, I think maybe coming into something like that older allowed me to think more clearly about it.

So, while Loki expressed the possibilities of being queer being taken away through experiences in secondary schools, it is also worth noting that this also allowed Loki to “think more clearly about it” later on and develop a potentially stronger sense of self. When asked what the main messages received about being a student and a human being through secondary school experiences, Loki replied:

My overarching message, since I was in honors classes, was: to beat the system and that I was never good enough. That’s what the girls in my honors classes did. It wasn’t about studying and learning and thinking. It was about just trying to get an A. That’s what I was taught in high school. And I never tried, because I was already good at taking tests and writing and stuff. So, I never had to try. The only thing about high school that ever taught me anything was being in marching band. It taught me how to not pass out in the summer *(laughs).* How to be independent, to some extent. And how to deal with my own crap and don’t let other people take advantage of me. But, as far as my actual classes, there were rare occasions where I felt like they helped, I guess. That’s pretty much the message that we got as well. But, it was kind of like if you’ve gotten this far doing whatever you’re doing, just keep doing it. And I don’t feel like they tried to encourage us to think outside the box. But, I think it was reinforced that we were intelligent women that could handle things and go on to do things. But, the things that they wanted us to go on and do were not the things that I wanted to do.

When asked about the largest contributing factors for successfully navigating middle and high school, Loki explained:

Never being told that I couldn’t do something. I mean, my parents were really strict with me when I was a kid. But, my mom would never, ever restrict the things that I read. If I said I wanted to do something, then my mother would never say I couldn’t do that. So, I grew up thinking—perhaps somewhat erroneously—that I was extremely intelligent and that I could do whatever the hell I wanted when I got older. But it kind of developed more into an apathy. By the time I graduated from high school, I didn’t really want to go to college. I knew that I was good at writing and English. But, I was just so sick of being surrounded by bitchy people—all the time. And I didn’t want to go to college, but I knew that I had to. So, I did. I guess part of going to an all-girls school is trying to get over women’s stereotypes. So, it was like, do whatever you want—study math (not like I did).
So, I feel like, as far as career-wise, I was always pushed to try anything out, I guess. Never stop reading things. And I haven’t.

Loki detailed how the support from her family, combined with the oppression experienced in middle and high school, helped navigate these tumultuous years:

And I think that’s part of the reason why I graduated high school with such a sense of apathy and not caring. Cause I really didn’t have any friends. And after I graduated, I pretty much stopped talking to the people I did talk to. Because I always felt like I was…like, there’s this group of people and I’m over here somewhere. Not in any particular group. I never really had close friends…I’m just not good at making friends, I guess. Or, I never used to be. But, I think that would have helped—if I would have had some kind of social group to fall back on. But, I didn’t, so I spent a lot of time thinking. I’m a lot stronger a person than I would have been if I hadn’t had to do that. There was no option. It wasn’t fail…it wasn’t drop out of high school…there was never anything…I mean, I had a lot of issues in high school. And, it was never a matter of trying to get out or trying to kill myself or something. It was just kind of—I have to get over this crap. So, I might as well just do it. (laughs) And try to stop caring so much. So, depression developed into apathy, pretty much. And by the time I got to college, I didn’t care what people thought of me. I dyed my hair purple. I wanted people to think that I was weird. Maybe that would provoke some kind of conversation…one I couldn’t start myself. I guess I still kind of do that.

When asked about friend support during middle and high school, particularly in relation to queer topics, Loki recounted:

The only time I ever talked about anything like that was with the girl that I made out with when I was a senior in high school. (laughs) And it was mostly like, Why are you bi and how do I become one? (laughs) Something like that. It wasn’t even something like, I think I’m not. It’s more like, that’s not even possible. That’s not a real thing.

This feeling of being on the fringe continues today for Loki:

I mean, when I first started getting in touch with that kind of thing, I was (and still am) friends with a person who was very into radical queer activism and stuff. And that was my image of being queer for a really long time…is that you had to be some kind of social justice activist person, or else you couldn’t be a part of that community. Which is why I’m still not. I still don’t consider myself a part of any community because I’ve never really been accepted by any of them cause I’ve never been blank enough…I’ve never been gay enough…I’ve never looked gay enough for these things. And I think that when I first came out to myself, that was a huge issue for me. Cause it was like, you’re either this awesome person who does these awesome things for the community, or you’re just less than that. (laughs) So, I’ve always been less than that. I’ve never gone to a pride
parade. *(laughs)* And I don’t really have any gay friends who are just fine with being
themselves. They always have to be more than that.

The feelings Loki expressed are similar to Jeremy’s and help show the complexities and long-
term effects of growing up in heteronormative, homophobic spaces that offer little to no visibility
or support structures for queer or questioning youth.

**Participant: George**

George is a White 27-year-old male who grew up in a suburban community in the
southeast U.S. He graduated high school in 2005, self-identifies as queer/post-label, and came
out when he was 23 years old. George graduated from an extremely small, private (religious) K-
12 school in a suburban setting.

**Textural Description**

George’s story offers a unique perspective to this study because he attended a private,
Christian school from Kindergarten through 12\textsuperscript{th} grade and was a very active member of his
school community. He did not come out until after graduating college as an undergraduate
student and his perspectives on his secondary school experiences have certainly evolved over
time. When asked to describe his middle and high school settings, George described the
following:

A small, private Christian school that was associated with the church that my family
attended. And I went there from K-5 through graduating high school and was in school
with a lot of those people from Kindergarten/1\textsuperscript{st} grade through graduating high school.
And it was associated with the PCA (Presbyterian Church of America), which is a bit
more on the conservative end of Presbyterian churches. It’s not—it’s no PC USA, which
is very liberal and people often get us confused. I graduated with a class of 28 my senior
year and the class before me was nine people. I mean, it was a very White school, it was
a very middle to upper class school, so there was very little diversity in any way you
could cut it. Pretty much all your middle class, White, Christian kids. We had a few
racial/ethnic minority kids who came through. A good number of times, I’d say, those
were often kids who had been adopted by White, upper/middle class families. Or
otherwise were international or students whose families had just moved to the United
States.
When asked whether he had access to a space or group in his middle or high school that addressed queer issues, George responded”

No—not in a positive sense. Does Bible class, where they told us about how sinful and horrible it was and we would all go to hell count as a space where they gave out access to information? That was the main source of information, I mean other than church.

Although George did not come out until after college and categorized himself as “homophobic” during these years (due to the home and school environment in which he was raised, according to him), he did report having access to some spaces or groups outside of school that addressed queer issues. In high school, George was an active user of an online social platform called MindSay. According to him:

It was one of the very few things that was unsupervised by my parents. But, what I remember from MindSay would be getting into arguments with people about gay marriage, marriage equality, same-sex marriage. Really anything non-hetero/cis-normative. (laughs) And I don’t even remember cause it was on their page, so, it was like…I didn’t seek out arguments, but I don’t know how I would have found this one without having sought it out. But, you know, you get on these things and you get to know a person who has a person who has a person and through some of them, I had some exposure to some different ideas and things. But, I had this argument with this person and it was long and drawn-out…essays going back and forth about, you know, same-sex marriage, marriage equality, and the ethics and morals of it—all this sort of stuff, and politics. So, that was one of, I would say, the places that I had the most access to…cause I was actually getting access to, exposure to ideas that were different than what I had been told. In many different forms, through that kind of online forum.

Another avenue George had exposure to that offered him some visibility of queer identities in adolescence was through his active involvement in an international volunteer service organization during high school, as he recounted:

I was our club president my junior and senior year and I went to all of our conferences and conventions. And there were a lot of public schools who were involved and I made a lot of really good friends through those. And a lot of those people were very different ways of thinking than I had been taught and brought up and thought at the time. And we got into really good conversations and debates. Sometimes about that kind of thing. I mean, my school taught creationism—like, that’s how conservative it was. I got in the creationism versus evolution debates with people. It’s not what I think anymore, for the
record. But, I got in a lot of conversations, debates with people and that helped, kind of, share some of those kinds of ideas with me. And, really, a couple of people from that I have remained really close friends with. [A female peer met during one of the conferences] was probably the first person ever to...cause I remember we were at a conference and you get those canvas totes that you get at a conference and carry around and I had all my stuff in it. And somebody had called it a manpurse. And I was like, *Uhh-don’t say that. That’s so gay.* And she was like the first person on the planet...and I remember this moment...who said, *Why do you say that? Have you thought about what that means?* I mean, at the time, I was like, *Well, you know, I’m not, like...I don’t agree with you. But...* She was the first person who gave me pause and was like, *Think about what you’re saying here and how it might affect someone else.*

George went on to make more connections with his experiences in the international volunteer service organization during high school and personal family connections to queer identities:

> I think that was one of the first times I knowingly had come into contact with openly, non-heterosexual, heteronormative people-especially my own age. My [family member] is gay, but he’s like the black sheep in our family cause he is simultaneously a horribly toxic manipulative narcissist. But, that has nothing to do with anything other than it doesn’t give my family a good taste in their mouth. So, he’s the only person I had come into contact with before that. And then these other students. And she just got to me. And I found out years later...well, one, a student from her school who I had gotten to be really good friends with over the years was gay. And so I got to know him. And I found out years later, actually, he was the one who helped me come out and was the first person who asked me the question point blank. And found out through him that the girl who called me out on that...had dated a girl before and I had never known that. So, it was really weird, but...Yeah, the international volunteer service organization was a big place of exposure.

When asked if he knew any friends or classmates who were openly queer during these years,

George again mentioned the connections and friendships forged at the international volunteer service organization’s events and the importance he placed on them in his development:

> And it was interesting, when we reconnected years later, he basically mentored me through coming out. And I’m so grateful that [she] introduced me to him. And I had no idea that [she] would be the gateway to me coming out later. Because it was through him. She was my only connection to him. I talked on the phone to him a couple of times and he, you know, helped me sort of process through things. And that was hugely instrumental. So, knowing him in high school, I mean, I had no idea how big of a deal it was going to be. And we still keep in touch now.
George believed that his school did address issues of bigotry through curriculum and instruction, although it was not as rigorous as he would have preferred. He recounted a history teacher who also taught Bible classes who did engage in some “lip service to ‘racism is bad’” in classes, but never more than basic conversations about race (combined with contradictory ideas about the U.S. Civil War, slavery, and states rights). When asked if discussions of homophobia ever came up in school, George recounted:

**AP Euro, we talked about WWII and Hitler and the Holocaust. When that came up, it wasn’t just Jewish people that Hitler was rounding up and putting in concentration camps. It was people who had the quote wrong skin color or wrong eye color or, you know, didn’t have the quote appropriate or correct gender expression. And then there were the gays who got rounded up and put in the concentration camps as well. God, I remember just…I think this is so much a self, for me like a defensive attribution and like a fear-based thing, you know? I don’t know, maybe wanting to have some sort of having this really scary fear-stimulus to stave off the gay in myself back then, but thinking, Oh, the Holocaust was so horrible, but, like, thinking it was okay that he was doing that to like gay people. Right? Then we had a whole class conversation about that. And you know, the teacher actually did a good job, that teacher did a good job of managing that conversation. Which is not the same one…not the Bible teacher and history teacher. But he…this one was a different history teacher…he did a good job of managing that conversation and kind of putting me in my place. I mean, I’m telling you. I was very close-minded, narrow-minded, homophobic when I was younger. And I haven’t thought about that moment in a very long time. The horrible, horrible, horrible things I thought and said back then.**

George also indicated reading feminist literature in AP English classes in high school. In addition to examples from history class in school, George also recalled how homophobia was addressed through his Bible classes:

**The other way in which homophobia kind of came up in class was in my Bible classes. We talked about, like…in one of my Bible classes, it was specifically how to defend your faith and stuff. And we spent a huge portion of that class on the gay agenda. But, the homophobia piece more was saying it’s not homophobia. It’s okay. You’re not homophobic for thinking these things. It’s what you’re supposed to say and do and think. That’s the context in which it came up outside of that one history class.**
Perhaps not surprisingly, George did not know of any out teachers or faculty in his middle or high school, although he discussed some rumors that swirled around the school and community about two female physical education teachers who later left the school.

In terms of curriculum and instruction, George detailed his exposure to queer content and contributions through his experiences in middle and high school classes:

We didn’t talk about Stonewall, interestingly, in my AP U.S. history class. Which you’d think for AP history class…cause they were aware of us having to take the test that would have exposed us to important historical events. But we didn’t talk about that. I think we may have talked a little about Greco-Roman, you know, things like Alexander the Great and stuff like that. You know, having male sexual partners and things. But, any time that came up in classes, it was always with the, ‘Look at how bad this person was’ type of context. English, we did Shakespeare and As You Like It and talked about the theme of homoeroticism in that. But, it wasn’t like in a good context. It was more like a, Look at how silly and stupid this is. The teacher was always like, It’s not the same thing as, like, homosexuality and being gay. This is just homoeroticism. I’m trying to think what else. Bible. It came up in Bible classes, like all along the way.

He did recall learning that homosexuality was removed as a psychological disorder from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in one of his history classes in high school. George also went on to detail explicitly how he experienced interactions with queer content through Bible classes in middle and high school:

I think in every year it came up in some form or fashion in Bible [class]. Because there was always the Sodom and Gomorrah story in the Old Testament. We talked about the gay agenda. We talked about Exodus International and how they’re saving the world, basically. We watched a video about, like, ex-gays, former gays who turned their life around. We basically were taught that all gay men are child molesters and child rapists. And part of the evidence of that was like how the ACLU had historically defended NAMBLA, which is the National American Man-Boy Love Association…we basically were told that men, all gay men, that that’s what they all are. We watched a video about the horrors of NAMBLA and how the ACLU had defended them in court.

After discussing his school’s philosophy and practices guiding curriculum and instruction revolving around homosexuality, George extended his reflections to touch on how queer identities and sexualities were discussed in school:
But, I was basically taught that that’s what it meant to be gay…that you were going to get an STD. You’re probably going to get HIV. There’s no way to have safe gay sex. Sex at all did not come up in our health classes, other than to say you shouldn’t be having it. Like, one whole year our entire health class was an abstinence education course where we were just taught all the horrors of what you could get. All the diseases and stuff and why. And a part of that was, it wasn’t just abstinence education, it was abstinence education and also only have, like, heterosexual contact or whatever. So, there’s no mention of, like, how to actually have safe sex. We were basically taught that even if you attempted to…I mean, we knew about condoms and they sort of recognized that those exist, but they weren’t going to ever give them to us or say it was okay to use them or anything like that. But, it was like, even if a gay person had sex with a condom, like, they still would get…and this was Bible class where I got this conversation. And a little bit in health class. But, you’d still get HIV because condoms aren’t designed for anal intercourse and that’s the only way to have sex if you’re…And it was always male to male, penetrative, anal intercourse that was the focus. There was no really discussion or recognition of lesbian sexuality. No discussion of bisexual or queer. I mean, queer was definitely…that was like the bad word that you called the gays when I was in school. And of course now that’s how I identify. There was no discussion of trans*/. The only time I remember talking about anything trans* related was I think in AP Bio where we got around to some discussion about, like, what’s the difference between transvestite versus transsexual. Transgender was not even a word that we ever used. Never, like, trans* with a *…that never was…it was always, like, transsexual, transvestite and kind of like how on earth could anyone ever want to do that and why it’s bad was kind of the context of the conversation.

George summarized his school’s approach to addressing homosexuality in curriculum and instruction through materials and discussions in the following account:

We watched so many videos about why the gays are going to go to hell and why, like, if you’re not straight it’s bad. It’s going to be bad for you. It’s gonna bring, like, tragedy down on everyone you know. I mean, really they had us thinking…without saying so much, the context was essentially, like, it’s going to rain hellfire and brimstone down on you and your family and everyone you love if you ever do that. And that mentality was…I mean, religion and, like, Christian perspective on things, specifically that sort of specific brand of conservative Christian thought/interpretation was woven throughout pretty much every class. Even math class. Like, math, science, English—everything. It was like, What’s the Christian perspective on this? We talked about evolution and creationism in Bible classes and all that sort of stuff. We used a lot of Focus on the Family originated materials. And you know, they would teach us, like I learned how evolution worked but it was because they wanted to be like, This is how people think evolution works. And this is why it doesn’t really work that way. And this is why. But, you need to know it for the AP exam because they’re going to ask you and we want you to pass the AP exam. We also want you to be able to tell people why they’re wrong.
The only other direct inclusion of queer topics George recalled, other than through Bible classes and in academic coursework, was through student-led mock elections that mimicked actual Presidential campaigns. George helped run the George W. Bush campaign his senior year and recalled including questions and challenges around same-sex marriage and gay equality during this project.

George was a very academically focused student and all-around model student in middle and high school. When he did have time to read for pleasure, he enjoyed fantasy, science fiction, comic books, and superhero genres. When asked if he remembered his school having queer young adult or adult literature in their catalogue, George said, “I think they would have kept those away from us. Judy Blume was not, like, something that was okay in our school in the first place, let alone if it was, like, queer related.” Overall, George reported that his middle school environment was not a safe environment for queer or questioning students or faculty, as he recounted:

In a way middle school was worse cause middle schoolers are social cannibals. It’s eat or be eaten. And you’ve got to survive in middle school to not be bullied into oblivion for any number of reasons. So, to give one other reason…and to be called gay was literally the worst possible insult. You know, like, gay and faggot were easily thrown around terms at my school. And those were like the worst possible things you could call or say or accuse somebody of. To have that, like, black mark on your reputation. So, I mean, that was true all throughout, but in middle school it was even worse in a way because everybody was already so on the lookout for, like, how to take each other down and tear each other down and build them back up. Cause everybody is so insecure in middle school that it’s just like, you know, in order for me to succeed and survive, I’ve got to take somebody else down. It’s like Mean Girls in middle school. So, I don’t think the gay piece changed or the questioning piece changed, but I think there were so many other things that compounded on top of it in middle school that would have made those years even worse and scarier.

George indicated that his high school environment was a bit safer for queer or questioning individuals, but you had to stay in the closet in order to remain safe, as he described:
You know, people didn’t get beat up at my high school, I will say. I got into, like, one fight and one other kind of physical altercation—it wasn’t really a fight—when I was in school. And I am like hugely pacifist, anti-violence now in my life. But, people didn’t really get beaten up or have physical altercations that much. Definitely not at school. But there were, like, times when things…nothing was really confirmed, but things happened outside of school. And definitely people, given the opportunity, would have. And there were people, looking back, that I would have been physically terrified of had they known anything back then. But the thing is, everybody knew that was the case, so nobody would have said anything back then to give them the opportunity to do something like that.

George’s reflections illustrate the very real dangers that queer or questioning youth face both inside and outside school environments, which they must negotiate on a daily basis to avoid giving others “the opportunity to do something.”

**Structural Description**

Although George’s experiences in his private, Christian secondary school certainly caused him to more deeply explore his own beliefs and identity (particularly in relation to queer topics), he is also quick to note the role his teachers played in shaping his development:

Ironically, many of them were good educators. I remember a lot of things I was taught very well because they were good at teaching. Even when what they were teaching was a horrible message. They were good at getting it through your skull. And they…I don’t know if they understood this idea, but in psychology, they talk about inoculation. It’s extremely effective to inoculate people to an opposing idea before they’re exposed to it. And they were good at that. I don’t know if they realized they were doing it. But, they were really good at manipulating and indoctrinating us. And making sure we had exposure to all, in theory, all sides. But only painting one, very narrow, specific viewpoint as the correct side. And it was the church.

Even though George got along with and respected his teachers during this time period, this overarching feeling of being on “the correct side” of things in secondary school explained why neither he nor any of his peers were out of the closet during these years. When asked if he would have felt comfortable going to a teacher or adult in middle or high school with questions of gender or sexual orientation, George harkened back to these rules of the school and staying on “the correct side”: 
Not personal questions. Because if you had asked it personally, that would have cast a huge, like…I would have felt spotlighted for that. In my school, I would have imagined that if you asked somebody that would have kicked in, at least, the teacher rumor mill. And it probably would have been, *Oh, we’re so concerned about him. You need to know we had this conversation so you can be looking out for him. And watch out for this stuff and be aware. And look for other signs that we might have to do something.* You know, how I think it would have potentially gone down is in like a class discussion talking more hypothetically about these things from the *Let’s ideologically inoculate you so that you know how to argue against people who think different than you in the future if you come across somebody who identifies as non-hetero, cis-normative.* Not that they used any of that fancy queer talk back then. *(laughs)*

Further illustrating this balance of staying on “the correct side” in high school, George explained that he would only have felt comfortable reading a book with queer content in school, “Only if I was ripping it apart, basically. Only if I was being negatively critical of it.”

When asked whether the interactions with queer content and contributions he received through his secondary school experiences positively or negatively influence his understanding of self, George explained:

I mean, the easy answer is negatively, obviously. But, at the same time, I do think there was some element of the struggle through it all that made me a stronger person. And, over time, coming into contact with the push/pull between what I was feeling in myself and not wanting to recognize and what I was being explicitly taught, I think that really forced me to kind of look at the world in a different way and be…in some ways I don’t know if it’s I have a more scientific mind inherently or that kind of forced me to think in a more science-y way. Because it was about, okay, pause, step back, examine the evidence between these two things. I think it definitely delayed my ability to understand myself, for sure. You know, getting to know myself. I didn’t come out until after college, so, I think I could have been out much earlier…I could have figured things out much earlier had I had a more supportive, open environment…had I had exposure…you know, had I been able to…had gay stuff not been invisible. If I had been able to see, like, gay characters on things and not think it was, like, super taboo. So, had I had something in school or people I could have talked to…anything, I would have gotten there faster. So, it’s negative and positive. I don’t wish the struggle upon anyone, but in some ways, I’m grateful for it.

The overarching message that George received about himself as a student and as a whole human being through his overall experiences in middle and high school revealed:
George did speak to the level of support he received through secondary schooling, even if that support was not queer-specific. He relayed:

As long as my sense of self was on the party line, yeah. I think I had lots of it. But, if it deviated from it, there wasn’t anybody that I could think of that I could have gone to and talked to about that without being pathologized or vilified. But, as long as my development was…my development of self was into, you know, an upstanding, hetero cis-normative male who would marry a woman and be the spiritual head of his household and be the breadwinner…As long as that was what I was developing towards, there was lots of support for it. There were times when I discussed questions about faith and things with teachers, but it was always under the assumption that…the presupposition that the questions were me asking them because I wanted to make sure I was doing the “right” thing. That I was developing in the “right” direction. To help have some sort of corrective feedback to go…to be more that kind of person that I was supposed to be, according to their interpretation of the Bible.

Despite the contradictory messages and oppressive environments in which George had to navigate during adolescence, he did discuss the largest contributing factors to him successfully making it through these years:

Getting through generally, I think I had a lot of support. You know, my family, in general, was very supportive. My mom in particular. My teachers…I had really good relationships with my teachers. I always had a core group of two to four really close friends. [I] was successful academically, got into a good college, like all that stuff. You know, I did have to work hard but I am aware that I have been…I’m fortunate, blessed, gifted, whatever. And having some intelligence. I’m pretty smart. And I think that helps a lot, like, being able to get through cause I just focus on my schoolwork and stuff, you know? When the international volunteer service organization came around, that was
huge for me because it just gave me this outlet for pieces of myself that I didn’t get an outlet for otherwise. A creative outlet, ability to work with people, develop a lot of skills that I still use professionally that I didn’t have before. But, I mean, first and foremost, I think it was knowing I had people to support me. And my parents never put academic pressure on me. I was so, sort of, self-motivated and driven and organized. I was very organized also and I think that helped me get through. Like to the point of being actually OCD. But, it’s kind of different from the whole…cause I think some of the things…like that same social support that was important in helping me navigate through specifically as a student, as a person in general helped…would have been…you know, contributed equally as much to inhibiting me from exploring those other important parts of myself that I had the space to explore later. But, when I had the space to explore them later, it was because of the support of the people around me and getting to know openly- queer identified people. But, you know, it was people who helped me do that in the long run. And some exposure to other ideas in classes or whatever, but I still credit that to people because they were the ones having conversations with me and being supportive and open.

Although George did not actively seek out information on queer life or identities during middle or high school, he was exposed to some positive representations of queer life during adolescence through the Internet (conversations and exchanges on MindSay), through interactions with others (like friends made at the international volunteer service organization’s national meetings), and briefly through TV programs (although these examples were very limited). However, the culture of George’s community and school certainly impacted his development and understanding of self during these years. When discussing learning about homosexual persecution at the hands of Hitler and the Nazis, George recalled his mindset during this time, “Oh, the Holocaust was so horrible, but, like, thinking it was okay that he was doing that to gay people. Right?” George went on to state:

I mean, I’m telling you. I was very close-minded, narrow-minded, homophobic when I was younger. And I haven’t thought about that moment in a very long time. The horrible, horrible, horrible things I thought and said back then. I thought that’s what I had to think and say to be a good little Christian boy or I wouldn’t get into heaven. And, you know, if it was okay to kill and beat up gay people, then it gave me a really good reason not to engage in even thought processes. It gave me a good, kind of something scary to look to. Cause even back then I had random little impulses or things where I was like, What’s that? Like, I’d see a guy on TV and I would be like, What’s this feeling? What’s this? It was never with anyone I went to school with, though. But, I remember having those little things and even before I understood what it was, I was just like that’s
not okay. So, I sort of really internalized those messages that I was hearing at church and at school.

Elaborating on internalizing the messages he was receiving in adolescence from church and school about what it meant to be, act, or engage in anything queer, George reflected:

Some of those things I think I was very eeek about back then because I was aware that I had some of those tendencies and was actively fighting not to come across the way that I perceived [my openly queer friend] coming across because I was afraid, you know…At the time, I didn’t really have awareness of myself, but I knew that there had been times in my life that people had been like, Oh, don’t do that. That’s gay or whatever. And I was like, Oh God. I can’t do that then. Cause I’ve always been the kid who, like, I love the action/comic/superhero movies and I love a good musical. And I’ve always been that way and kind of had some stuff that I did and enjoyed that was not stereotypically what the masculine little boys thought was okay. So then, I learned to censor those things, cause I didn’t really fully understand why. I was just taught it wasn’t okay.

George synthesized these messages and how the process of internalizing his feelings, emotions, and identity manifested in his life:

The only awareness I had, at that age in like middle school and high school, was it’s bad. It’s a sin. You can’t do it, so keep your distance. Unless you’re going to be fighting the good cause for God and Christianity. So, really through even my freshman year of college, looking back, I would definitely call myself pretty homophobic, queerphobic, transphobic. In my freshman hall of college, I was the token, Bible-beating conservative kid. And then, somewhere things took a left…a very left turn, for the better.

Although George is proudly queer/post-label now and actively works to create spaces and advocacy for queer individuals and communities in his personal and professional life, he revealed that he continues to feel that internalization with his family, as he stated:

I am very open here [college], but I am not out to my parents. And that is one place that I have kept a bubble of ignorance, is around my family…anybody who knows my family, I haven’t told. Not that I suspect they don’t know, but I haven’t told them yet.

**Participant: Calliope**

Calliope is a White, 25-year-old female who grew up in a suburban community in the southeast U.S. She graduated high school in 2006, self-identifies as lesbian, and came out when she was 19 or 20. Calliope graduated from a large, public high school in a suburban setting.
Growing up in a suburban community outside a large, metropolitan city provided Calliope limited representations of queer identities during adolescence. She attended a large high school that had a club for diversity (composed of all African American students, which reflected the demographics of Calliope’s suburban community) and a group that worked with severely mentally disabled students. She described the program and her school’s treatment of diversity:

It was a club where students could interact with them, lead lessons, do activities. You know, play sports and stuff. So, as far as diversity goes in that way-yes, my school was a lot better at dealing with disabilities rather than cultural diversity.

When asked if her school had a space or group for queer or questioning students, she replied:

To be honest, there may have been a gay/straight alliance at my high school. And I know the teacher who would have sponsored it, if there was. But if it existed, it was so small and membership was so stigmatized that it wasn’t anything I was comfortable considering. So, for all intents and purposes, no.

Perhaps this feeling of discomfort Calliope described was also true for her peers during their secondary school experiences, as she continually reinforced the fact that not a single person was out in her large high school. She recounted:

There were plenty of people who were suspected of being gay, who later came out as gay. But the extent of bullying that they suffered just for being suspected of being gay really discouraged anyone from coming out. There was not a single out student at my school. I mean, I’m sure there were a few people who may have been out to close friends or to family members. But just openly-no.

Calliope also reported that, like students, there were also no out teachers during middle or high school because, “it wasn’t something that was spoken about.” When asked specifically whether she thought her middle school environment was safe for queer or questioning students or faculty, Calliope responded:
There was not a single out person, whether it was staff or student, faculty at the school. So, I mean, I’m sure physically you could have existed and been safe. Well, as a student at least. I mean, there’s no job security. So, obviously they could have fired whoever they wanted. But, I mean, no-not emotionally/socially safe. I mean, no one was out for a reason.

Calliope’s feelings on safety for queer or questioning students or faculty did evolve somewhat in her high school environment, as she described:

I mean, it probably would have been less scary and more scary in different ways. I think high schoolers aren’t as mean to each other as middle schoolers are. And my high school was bigger than my middle school. In my middle school class, there were maybe like 150-200 of us. But, in high school, my class was almost 500 students. So, it would have been a lot easier to maybe be gay and just be ignored rather than the attention…the spotlight that would have been put on it in middle school.

In recounting her high school experiences, Calliope described the rezoning of her suburban school district, evolving her school from a predominately White student population her freshmen year to a more equally distributed racial population (Black/White) by her junior year.

When asked if she ever had a teacher address bigotry, racism, or sexism in the classroom, Calliope said that her school was “pretty interesting in that way.” She went on to say, “There were definitely teachers who would just hear the n-word and turn their head and do nothing about it. But there were other teachers that were very active and definitely incorporated it into the curriculum-antiracism.” No teachers ever discussed homophobia in school, to Calliope’s knowledge, as she stated, “Not that I can remember. I feel like I would have remembered that one. I feel like I was probably trying to listen for it, you know?”

Calliope is the only other participant in the study (besides Saj) to have had a classmate openly participating in a queer commemoration or demonstration at school. She recounted:

I remember having a class my sophomore year with a student who was participating in National Day of Silence. It was the first time that I heard about it. And she didn’t speak. The one class I had with her, the teacher, I mean, they didn’t give her any hell for it. I don’t think it was sponsored by a club. If it was, it wasn’t advertised. And I don’t
remember any other students ever doing it. Just the one. So, that could have definitely just been an own-her-own type thing.

Calliope was unaware of any negative reactions from classmates toward the student participating in National Day of Silence.

She felt she received a good academic education in many regards through her secondary school experiences and is also the only participant in the study to have revealed reading Sappho in her high school English class. When asked if the author’s sexuality was discussed, Calliope reflected, “You know, to be honest, I don’t think it was ever said. I think it was implied and it was understood, but I don’t think it was ever spoken that it was a woman writing to another woman.” She was an active reader in middle and high school and some of her favorites included historical fiction, Dave Eggers, Kurt Vonnegut, and “anything by Khaled Hosseini I could find”. When asked specifically about reading queer content during middle or high school, Calliope spoke of her relationship with Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex* (which subsequently inspired Calliope’s pseudonym for this study):

I mean, I think it was by accident that I stumbled upon *Middlesex*. And, I mean, I hung out at the bookstore a lot. And I think I found it one day. But I was definitely drawn to it by the title. I had heard the name because I had heard Jeffrey Eugenides’ name because he had written *The Virgin Suicides*. And it was definitely the *Middlesex* title and the synopsis that got me…that drew me to that book. But I got away with reading it without seeming like I was interested in the gayness of it by saying, *Oh, he’s the guy that wrote The Virgin Suicides.*

Calliope’s example of reading *Middlesex* during adolescence demonstrates that she knew how to navigate the formal and informal rules of her school culture by reading a book with queer content, while not drawing unwanted or unwarranted attention to either the text or herself.

*Structural Description*

Although Calliope did not particularly seek out information on queer topics during middle or high school, she did come into contact with queer content through some channels, as
she described, “There were very few places. Maybe Internet. A few random books that I picked up by chance. And…the occasional threatening sermon.” She went on to elaborate on the community in which she was brought up and the visibility of queer identities:

Homosexuality was so invisible in my community, unless it was fire and brimstone (*laughs*). You know, unless they were telling you you were going to hell or that you were just somebody in ass-less chaps rollerblading down Main Street in a gay pride parade in New York. Those were the only two images that were available. So, I think to most of us...I know several other people from my high school who have come out since. I think to most of us the idea that we could stop being gay was a much more of a realistic possibility than coming out and than living comfortably, happily as gay. So, like my thinking never got to the point of, Oh, who can I tell? If that makes sense. Living openly gay wasn’t an option to even consider. So, coming out...I never thought about someone to come out to.

She elaborated on why coming out in her community or school, much less even coming out to self, meant venturing into unchartered territory:

I mean, I think the reason I felt I couldn’t come out was that...I’m remembering now the huge Baptist mega-church. There was one Sunday, a gay man who was healed was on stage-this church had a stage, right?-crying and hugging the pastor. And it was this big thing-the male pastor hugged this man, but he wasn’t gay anymore, so it was okay. So, those were, like, the only two images available to me of, you know, what you could be if you were gay. Right? But, like, the one guy wasn’t even gay anymore-right? So, he wasn’t going to hell. So, either you’re going to hell, or you’re not gay, right? If someone could have just mentioned that this writer lived with his husband or his boyfriend or his partner, just so you could...just any image of somebody who was gay and lived a normal life. But I didn’t know that that was an option. So, I mean, you don’t even have to put, like, a big spotlight on it. Or talk about it or have a big conversation about it. Just an image or any example-however small.

Calliope connected these feelings of coming out in her community and lack of visibility of positive queer representations to her school environments and synthesized why there were no out students at her middle or high school, as she stated:

There were no existing examples of someone who had come out and, you know, been punished or ostracized because of it. But there were also no examples of someone who had come out and been okay. So, even though there wasn’t an explicit threat, just the not knowing what would happen was scary enough in itself to keep everybody in the closet.
Added to the fears of staying in the closet during middle and high school Calliope expressed existing in her community and school environments, she also spoke to the level of discourse around homosexuality amongst peers during this time period:

Other than calling people fags? (laughs) If there was any discussion, it was really just accusations of someone being gay. Not even just discussing suspicions, but actual accusations and bullying. Any reference to like a gay pride parade was like as part of an insult. Like, Don’t you have a gay pride parade to be at right now? There was no actual discussion of issues.

However, Calliope did report positive experiences with many teachers during middle and high school. When asked if she would have felt comfortable going to any teachers or adults in middle or high school with questions of gender or sexual orientation, Calliope replied:

Looking back on it now, there were definitely teachers who were there and still are there that I probably could have gone to and definitely have spoken to them, you know, in confidence. And they would have been supportive and protective, even. But at the time, my thinking never got that far, if that makes sense.

She also indicated that, although she did not do so during middle or high school, she might have felt comfortable reading a book with queer content in school, as she responded:

[It] probably would have depended on the teacher. And how big a part of the book the queer content was. If it was just a gay character or if the book was about the character being gay. So, if I could have read it and done a book report on it without outing myself- yes. But if I couldn’t have without raising suspicions-no.

Calliope reinforced the absence of queer visibility in her school (and community) through interactions with teachers as she stated, “I mean, my teachers were great teachers…incredibly supportive. I mean, encouraging anything you wanted to do. And they weren’t outwardly discouraging of homosexuality. There just was no mention at all. Like it didn’t exist.”

Despite a lack of spaces or open dialogue about queer identities in secondary school, Calliope credits her middle and high school for academically pushing and supporting her. She
indicated that the overarching messages she received about herself as a student and as a whole human being through schooling were mostly positive, as she recounted:

Most of my high school experiences were, for the most part, very positive. So, the overarching messages were, you know, that me and all of my classmates were very capable and that we were going to succeed. And there was an assumption that we were going to go to college. There was always an issue of where, not if. Very positive messages.

When asked whether her secondary school experiences positively or negatively influenced her understanding of self, Calliope replied:

I think as an adolescent, it was probably a very negative impact, but ultimately a positive impact. If that makes sense. Well, in middle school and high school-limiting opportunities of who you can be, how you can express yourself. And as long as being gay wasn’t an option-not even just living openly but admitting it to yourself—as long as that was not an option, that made being a teenager suck in a lot of ways. But I think ultimately, I mean, as cheesy as it sounds, what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, you know? So, the lessons you learn from going through things like that, there’s always value to them. So, ultimately I guess, positives can come out of anything and definitely have. But at the time, it was a negative impact, for sure.

When asked what were the largest contributing factors that helped her successfully navigate her middle and high school experiences, Calliope spoke to the friction of growing up different in a society:

I don’t know. I made pretty good grades and I was academically successful. And, I mean, I was very social too. Despite the fact that I wasn’t really able to completely be myself and I had a big ole giant secret from all my friends. I did have lots of friends that I was very close to. I guess all of that helped that there were lots of positive things going on to distract from me from thinking about the, you know, that big, giant negative.

Calliope went on to describe how this dynamic of keeping “a big ole giant secret” as a queer or questioning person (much less an adolescent) in order to survive in a heteronormative society or space manifested in her life. When questioned about whether or not she herself played a role in helping navigate her way through middle and high school, Calliope focused in on an aspect of her self that had developed through her maturation:
I don’t know, honestly. Probably yeah. But not. I don’t know. I wouldn’t really say like an inner-strength or anything. But more than anything, probably just my ability to lie. Yeah—it’s actually really scary. Like, I’m a really good liar. And I think that that’s why. Because, I mean, for 18 years, I totally put on an act. Right? But, I mean also though, like, I’m really good at telling lies. But, it’s also a bigger lie to live one. And so, it makes just telling lies so much easier, if that makes sense. I really think that ultimately is the main thing.

Calliope’s example of relying on lies in order to navigate and survive middle and high school is a profound concept and offers more complex and complicated understandings into the lives of queer or questioning adolescents. The fact that queer youth, as embodied by Calliope’s explanation about her reliance on lying, are made to feel in their communities and schools like they need to live a lie in order to survive adolescence is a significant finding of this study.

Themes

After outlining a textural and structural description of each participant’s experience in relation to the overarching phenomenon that guides this study, data was analyzed from the collective experiences of all participants and themes began to emerge. Taking the collective experiences of all participants in this study into account, themes were generated that spoke to how participants experienced queer content in school and during adolescence, how they understood their lives in relation to these interactions, and their understanding about how to make schools better for queer or questioning students. These themes were compiled into four specific categories as a way to give control and order to the findings. Table 4 outlines the categories and themes that emerged and a composite description of each follows. Combined with the preceding textual and structural descriptions of participants, explorations of the themes that emerged throughout the study reveal the essence of the phenomenon being examined.
Table 4

Categories and Themes

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<thead>
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<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Absence or negative interactions with queer content in schools</td>
<td>a. Silencing or ignoring queer issues</td>
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<td>b. Negative reactions/lack of response from school staff</td>
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<td>c. Negative reactions from peers</td>
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<td>Learning about queer life as a queer or questioning adolescent</td>
<td>a. Not having a history</td>
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<td>b. Self-education</td>
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<td>c. Books and literature</td>
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<td>d. Media</td>
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<td>e. Teaching others</td>
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<td>Navigating secondary schools as a queer or questioning student</td>
<td>a. The closet and disclosure</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c. Survival strategies</td>
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<td></td>
<td>d. Finding spaces and support</td>
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<td>Queering identities, histories, and support structures in schools</td>
<td>a. Benefit for participants</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. Benefit for queer students</td>
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<td>c. Benefit for all students</td>
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Absence or Negative Interactions with Queer Content in Schools

Despite attending diverse secondary school settings, participants shared that they did not feel they received any positive interactions with queer content or contributions in their middle and high school experiences. Almost all of the participants expressed that they did not receive any direct instruction or positive representations of queer identities during these years. Those who did directly learn about queer topics during their secondary school experiences spoke about the negative framing of such issues. Participants also discussed the ways in which the adults in their school environments did not intervene (and sometimes participated) during moments where queer or questioning students were being teased, bullied, or ridiculed. Other participants spoke about the ways in which their peers reacted negatively to queer topics that did come up in school.
Silencing or Ignoring Queer Issues

Overall, participants continually reinforced that discussions, instructive moments, or explorations of queer content were silenced or ignored in their middle and high school experiences. Loki and George are the two exceptions, as both attended private, religious secondary schools that directly discussed queer issues in the classroom. When asked if she received any positive representations of queer identities in school, Loki replied, “Definitely not. It was actually against the rules in our school. I went to Catholic school. I guess it was policy or something.” Discussions of Loki and George’s negative interactions with queer content in schools are detailed in the next section. Although some participants did share that they had teachers who incorporated discussions of bigotry (sexism, racism) in their instruction, Owen was the only participant who reported having a teacher in school directly address homophobia in the classroom.

In interviews and focus groups, participants continually relayed their feelings of being ignored, silenced, or erased in their schools. These feelings stem from a lack of supportive school environments that made spaces and policies for all students, combined with the denial of positive queer representations in literature, history, social sciences, and sex education. Participants discussed their resentment and frustration at not receiving any information or understanding in secondary schools about queer identities throughout history or contemporary issues. This denial not only caused participants to feel cheated in their education of queer contributions and histories, but also made them feel unsafe, unwelcome, oppressed and/or marginalized in their middle and high school settings. Saj spoke to this as he explained:

I never felt at home. I never felt I belonged because your inactivity or unwillingness to foster an environment that was safe for me, as a hard working and high achieving LGBT student of color, actively made the environment hostile.
Saj’s sentiments were echoed by other participants, as they spoke about the ways in which the silencing of queer issues in their secondary school experiences made them feel as students during adolescence. For Loki, this silencing made her feel like not ever crossing sexual boundaries in her school life or her personal life:

I mean, when you go to a school where it’s just not brought up, there’s no immediate threat. But there’s also no fostering of some sort of environment where you feel like you can tell people things like that. It’s just kind of like, don’t ask/don’t tell. Basically, you just, kind of, don’t try.

LC discussed the ways in which the silencing or ignoring of queer topics in school not only affected her academic development, but also her understanding of self:

I feel that I was cheated with my education. No one taught me about LGBTQ related curriculum. I was forced to spend my middle and high school years not being able to relate to anyone or anything. Luckily I made it out a stronger person but I feel that is not the case for so many other LGBTQ students.

Indeed, almost every single participant shared stories of positive interactions and experiences during their middle and high school years. Yet, they were quick to also point out the gaps or silences in curriculum and instruction that also impacted their development, as Calliope detailed in her letter to her favorite high school teacher:

The things we studied, the activities we did, the discussions we had all helped me realize the many different options I had available to me as far as who I could become and what I would do with my life. We talked about everything in your class. Except for one thing. No one ever said the word gay. We never read, wrote, or talked about a single queer person. It was like your classroom opened up the entire world to me, but homosexuality didn’t exist in it. Of all the options I had—being gay wasn’t one of them. I didn’t know that it was possible for someone to be gay and be okay. I didn’t know what a well-adjusted, happy, successful gay person looked like—or if any even existed. In our school, even in your classroom—the most open and liberal of all classrooms—homosexuality didn’t exist. I didn’t exist.

What is particularly interesting about Calliope’s letter is her recognition of the positive experiences she had with this teacher in high school, while still acknowledging the effects of the erasure of queer identities within this space. Megan summed up the sentiments of most of the
participants on this topic, as she called on teachers to, “Stop lying to students and stop ignoring them.”

Owen directly took on former teachers and schools in their the to their school system and spoke to the damage that silencing or ignoring queer identities has on students:

By denying our cultural history, you are turning a blind eye to our suffering and allowing for the proliferation of bullying, erasure, and violence. You are guilty of ignoring your children. Your sons, daughters, in between, otherwise, and none altogether. We have been effaced to the point of self-effacement. We were your students and deserve a place in your halls. By denying us knowledge of ourselves, you are denying us our identities. We are reduced to amorphous effigies of our own selves. We are not allowed a community under your roof and instead are forced into cramped quarters or tossed asunder. This is an act of violence in every facet. Acknowledge us as humans instead of as Others. Where is our history? Where is our culture? Where are our human rights? Why can’t we even be talked about?

Again, this silencing of queer identities in school affected participants differently, but Loki spoke to the conclusions she drew as a queer adolescent in her letter to all religious high schools:

Dear religious high schools,
Some of your students are invisible. You’ve made them that way, and they might never be visible because of the things they’ve learned from you. You made me into someone with no sense of self. It took years to develop something on my own that should have been helped along. Participants discussed receiving no direct instruction on the queer identities of authors, historical figures, or events (even though many participants indicated that this content was often included in their textbooks, just never relayed by their teachers). No participant remembered their school library or teachers’ classroom libraries including books with queer content (fiction or nonfiction). When asked if he was ever exposed to a book with queer content by a teacher, Saj replied, “I mean, teachers made no effort in any way.” Additionally, no participant remembered seeing positive imagery, spaces, or programming in their middle or high school environment for queer or questioning students (such as Safe Zone, a GSA, or commemoration of National Day of Silence). Even web browsers on school computers suppressed participants’
access to information about queer identities through monitored filters. Although one study participant was able to find a way around it and gain full access to Internet web browsers on school computers, the rest of the participants expressed that Internet access was blocked by their school systems from allowing students to access any information on queer content (historical events, health issues, queer youth issues).

Almost every single participant discussed in detail the ways in which sex education was dealt with (or silenced) in their middle and high school environments. If sex education was provided to participants, they all expressed that the focus was either on abstinence only or heteronormativity. Every single participant expressed that queer sexualities or health issues were never included whatsoever in interactions with sex education in secondary school. All participants discussed the misguided and misinformed sex education they received in school and called for the inclusion of queer perspectives in sex education across the board.

A noteworthy finding of this study revealed that none of the participants knew of a teacher or staff member who was out of the closet in any of their middle or high schools, although many discussed rumors and speculation about particular teachers. Participants were quick to point out that teachers could risk losing their jobs as a result of coming out of the closet and they did not judge queer teachers who might remain closeted for job security. Many participants also acknowledged that teachers in their state were mandated by law to relay to students that homosexuality was illegal, however no participant ever received such messaging from any teacher in their middle or high school experiences. Participants rationalized that teachers did not want to directly relay to students that homosexuality was illegal, therefore they never brought it up at all. Although participants were readily calling for the inclusion of queer
content in secondary schools, they also acknowledged that the rationale and reasoning behind the silencing, ignoring, or denial of queer content from their schools and teachers were complex.

**Negative Reactions/Lack of Response from School Staff**

Owen is the only participant to have received direct instruction on queer contributions in secondary school, although it was not necessarily a positive interaction. He explained, “When we got to the Stonewall Riots, it was just like-*this happened.* Let’s skip over it without going into anything. *These gay people did this,* etc. That’s, like verbatim-*Gay people did this.*” Owen explained that there was no follow-up or discussion and that follow classmates were “uncomfortable, sweaty, looking away.” Loki recalled a discussion on homosexuality in her social justice class in her private, religious secondary school where her teacher relayed to students that being homosexual was like eating dirt. The teacher then proceeded to eat dirt from a plant she had brought in as a teaching tool to reinforce to her students a disgusting and dirty framing of homosexuality, asking the class, “Why would you do that? Why would you choose to do that?”

While participants did not feel that their middle and high school environments were necessarily unsafe for queer or questioning students or adults, they all discussed the lack of supportive structures and policies in place that would have made them feel wholly safe and accepted. Many spoke about not feeling safe to read what they wanted in school, to express themselves as they wanted, or to be (or suspected to be) outside the norm in any way. Megan spoke about receiving the message through school that she needed to keep questions or explorations of her identity a secret or she “would have been treated differently.” When asked how she might have been treated differently, Megan indicated that those students who fell outside the norm risked “not getting into certain clubs or organizations or certain teachers
grading you harsher than others.” Interestingly, participants continually brought up how Other students who fell outside the norm in their school were punished or treated differently (such as students of color, students whose families originated outside the U.S., shy students, intelligent/opinionated students).

Although some participants spoke of individual teachers who they could trust or go to with problems in their secondary school experiences, most expressed their uneasiness or fear of going to an adult at school with personal problems because they would have been reported to their parents. No participant shared feeling completely comfortable or supported by school counselors or teachers and therefore did not feel they had a confidential or sympathetic outlet at school in which to discuss problems, questions, or advice on personal matters (particularly relating to sexuality or gender expression). Combined with the denial of queer content or contributions in curricula and instruction, participants felt that the lack of confidential and supportive spaces in school for discussing problems or questions further added to their fear and stigmatization during adolescence.

All participants discussed teasing, bullying, and ridicule of students that took place in their respective secondary schools. Many participants relayed that teachers or adults in their schools would intervene in such instances, but never by directly acknowledging the infraction or specific target of the bullying. None of the participants ever witnessed their teachers or staff either positively intervening in instances of queer bullying by admonishing language or slurs used or recognizing queer students’ embodied vulnerabilities. Rather, teachers would simply tell the aggressors to behave or stop what they were doing, if they intervened at all. A few participants remembered teachers laughing along with their students as they used queer slurs in their bullying tactics against other students. The messages participants received from these
interactions were clear: stay in line (with the norm), or face a tremendously difficult road to navigate. Saj recalled the effects this had on his development, as he witnessed others experience this difficult road, as he stated, “I still remember the students and acquaintances who left because they were sick of being teased and ridiculed—when no teacher or administrator would come to their defense.”

Perhaps the most blatant example of negative reactions from teachers and schools regarding queer content came from George, who attended a private, religious secondary school. George relayed receiving instruction on homosexuality constantly throughout his middle and high school experiences, although all framed in a negative, sinful manner. He remembered his school using curricular materials from Focus on the Family and the subject of homosexuality being incorporated throughout the curricula. George also recalls watching videos and engaging in lessons about Exodus International, the presumed correlations of North American Man Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) to homosexuality, and “lots of Sodom and Gomorrah” discussions. According to George, the rationale for why homosexuality was included in his school’s curricula and instruction was to teach students how evil and wrong it was in order for them to be able to articulate and argue against it to others for the sake of Christianity. However, the result of his interactions with queer content in secondary school left George feeling afraid and damaged throughout adolescence and beyond. In his letter to his school, George directly articulated these feelings, called on his school to understand the damage they are perpetuating onto students, and challenged them to change their ways:

Thanks to you, I’ve had to deal with fear every day of my life since I first heard the word gay. You taught me to be afraid. Afraid of gay people, afraid of non-believers, afraid of believers, afraid of my family, afraid of God, and, more importantly, afraid of myself. I think there are fundamental flaws in the operating assumptions of your school when you teach kids to be petrified of letting themselves show, even to themselves. You clearly had no idea what it’s like to not be straight, to be different in any way. You need to go
educate yourself. The ideas you teach (or rather preach) lead to hatred, fear, suffering, anger, resentment, violence, alienation, disenfranchisement, and death in some cases. What is most important to you? The ideas you preach or the lives of countless queer youth who are terrified to live genuinely as their sincere selves. You need to change course or do everyone a favor and close down. You were once proud of me as a student and graduate from your school. You wanted to brag about my achievements and claim me as a success story. Would you be proud of me now? Have I stopped being a success? Am I still someone you’d want to brag about? Or has my honesty as a queer man made you see me as a villain or a monster? Well, news flash. I’m the same person who walked through your doors, and you need to deal with the damage you’ve done to me and others like me.

George’s letter reveals the complicated understandings and messages queer or questioning youth often receive through the negative reactions or lack of adequate responses to queer identities in their experiences in their secondary school environments.

**Negative Reactions from Peers**

With the exception of George whose secondary school environment attempted to create a feeling of animosity toward any thing or person perceived as queer, most participants did not elaborate much on openly hostile reactions from peers during adolescence. However, participants did recount the ways in which peers did sometimes react negatively to queer or questioning students or ideas in middle and high school. Almost all participants expressed hearing queer slurs from peers during these years and witnessed bullying of queer or questioning students on some level. Megan spoke about the "glares and shut-outs" that were customary occurrences for non-normative students. She also remembered jokes from peers about Emily Dickinson being a lesbian in literature class while Calliope recalled peers “calling people fags” and asking “don’t you have a gay pride parade to be at right now?” In the letter to their former school system, Owen articulated the experiences of these reactions by peers and the response of their teachers during middle and high school, as Owen wrote, “In my time at your institution, I was subjected to manifold discriminations personally through the stares I received going into
restrooms and vicariously as students were lambasted by slurs and mocked by the cacophony of their teachers laughing along.”

Again, participants did not continually point fingers to their peers when discussing their experiences with queer content or issues in middle and high school. But, they all remembered specific examples of peers bullying other queer or questioning students during these years and were able to articulate the feelings they had (and still harbor) about these examples. Some of these memories still affect participants, as Saj recounted:

There was a situation I remember. This specific person, he had really long hair. He was openly bi but likely because he was pretty flamboyant most people simply knew him as that gay kid. And so, it wound up in a situation of him getting into a fight and somehow, I think his hair was pulled or cut or something like that. I have no real way of knowing if that attack (and his choosing to completely shave off his hair afterwards) was motivated by that but I strongly suspect it was. But, it was really bad. I don’t even really want to get into it.

Going back to the idea of following the norm in order to survive middle and high school, perhaps the student from Saj’s example faced violence because he did not follow the rules or the norm of his school by presenting a flamboyant self and having long hair. Many participants spoke about students who did not follow the norm facing fear of persecution both inside and outside of school. George spoke to the dangerous balance that queer or questioning students must negotiate in order to survive middle and high school:

You know, people didn’t really get beaten up or have physical altercations that much. Definitely not at school. But there were times when things…nothing was really confirmed, but things happened outside of school. And definitely people, given the opportunity, would have. And there were people, looking back, that I would have been physically terrified of had they known anything back then.

Similar to Saj’s memories of the long haired boy getting hurt at school or other friends who were forced to leave school due to the bullying they faced, all participants spoke to the need to stay...
protective or secretive during adolescence in order avoid torment, bullying, or stigmatization from peers.

**Learning about Queer Life as a Queer or Questioning Adolescent**

Although only three participants were out during high school, all spoke directly about their exposure to queer identities or issues during adolescence. All participants indicated that school was not necessarily a space where they learned about queer topics, with the exception of George and Loki who both attended religious secondary schools where the topic of homosexuality was negatively discussed. It is important to note that many participants did not actively seek out information on queer topics during adolescence, even some who had been involved in same-sex relationships during middle and high school. However, all participants were able to reflect back upon adolescence now—with some distance and maturation—and speak to outlets they sought out or found for exploring and understanding queer identities, history, and literature.

**Not Having a History**

A theme that continued to come up in the data was participants expressing a lack of knowledge about the presence or contributions of queer people throughout history in their secondary school experiences. Participants were asked directly if they learned about Queer Rights Movements or queer historical figures in school, and Jeremy summed up the feelings of many participants as he stated, “See, I didn’t even know things like that existed until I was an adult.” Indeed, participants continually brought up what it was like “to attend another history lesson or read another literary classic that pretended that my life and my issues did not exist” (as spoken by Saj).
Extending from the idea of denying one’s “life and issues” in school, Jeffrey spoke directly to the larger implications at play through silencing and denial of identities and histories in schooling, as he stated:

I don’t think that you can get a truly comprehensive or accurate depiction of the cultural background that is the United States without including it. And not just even from a national standard, but from a global standard. I mean, you can’t…you can’t look at the chronology of the human race without including a sexual aspect to it. These are all part of the human condition. It’s all part of what it means to be part of the human race. Especially here in the South where we take a great pride in where we come from. If you’re queer identified and you’re in the South and you don’t have access to these things, then you don’t have a sense of where you come from. Therefore, you have no history.

This idea of accurately reflecting all history was echoed by virtually every single participant in the study. Participants did not call for or explicitly want a Queer Studies course in high school that individualized queer identities. They did not necessarily even want a Queer History Month celebrated at school. They all expressed a feeling that they needed and wanted to see history accurately reflected in the curriculum and through teachers’ instruction in order to understand how a host of identities from diverse backgrounds contributed to the history of the world as we know it.

Interestingly, many participants made connections to the silencing of other marginalized groups through schooling that they either noticed directly, or made historical connections to. Saj, the only African American participant in the study, claimed an exposure to the contributions of queer people (and African Americans) would have helped him develop “a sense of identity.” He summed up his experiences by stating:

Cause a lot of times in schools, there’s just not really a focus on African American stuff. So, it’s like, I know it’s there, but why does it have to take for me to get to college and then pay $8,000 to take a course on something that’s a part of history, you know?

LC also spoke about feeling a denial of a history and the disadvantage that put upon her later in life when she would interact with other queer people. She said, “Since then [I] have done
English or history projects touching on things like that, and I’ve had no clue what they’re talking about. And they’re just like, How do you not know that part of history? George, who did experience instruction on homosexuality and marginalized groups through his religious school experiences, made further connections about historical contributions and the importance of teaching an accurate and relevant curriculum:

Important historical events that have taken place that involve queer people should recognize the role that that has played. Don’t let students get out of school thinking that gay people have never contributed to society…that queer people have never contributed to society.

What is interesting about these discussions from participants are the ways in which they are viewing and understanding how schooling directly affects marginalized groups—particularly those in which they do not have direct membership. This acknowledgment illustrates how participants understand systems of oppression within a society and also points to their recognition of intersectionality politics that cuts across identities.

Megan spoke directly about how excluding identities from the curriculum affected students and the consequences of including these identities in schools (bringing in an intersectionality argument), as she said:

I think that it’s definitely gotten better in the past 10, 15 years as to being more inclusive with education. But I also think we have a long way to go. There’s this misconception of political correctness and inclusion that people think that you’re really uppity if you have to have that in the curriculum. Because they don’t understand being the Other. And largely heterosexual White people are the ones saying, Well, why can’t I call someone a faggot? Or, why do I have to teach this? Or, why do I have to teach that? Or why do I have to say this? Or why do I have to use gender-neutral pronouns? It’s because they don’t understand being gay or being of a different race and having your history and your identity completely ignored. And how that feels. And it may seem harmless, and it may seem like it’s not that big of a deal, but when you go through…I can’t imagine what it must have been like being an African American student before they taught Black history. And that may not have necessarily been a direct attack, but that had to hurt, somewhere. It had to hurt a lot. So, inclusion and representation is very, very important. And, I don’t care if we have to go as far as to say that we have to include transgender…asexual…two-spirited history. Like, I don’t care. As long as everyone is feeling like their voice is
being heard. And, you know, there’s not that many people who identify as two-spirited. There’s not that many people who identify as asexual. But, having just that 10-minute slide, one day out of the entire year makes a huge difference to that one person in that one school. And that should matter to us. We should care how that one person feels.

I wish that I would have been told in middle school or in high school when they were teaching about Abraham Lincoln’s life, I wish they would have talked about the rumor that he was homosexual. Because you know, if I’m a homosexual male sitting in that history class, I’m thinking, Wow! If one of the greatest leaders of the United States was queer, well then why the hell can’t I be queer?

Again, Megan’s perspective is unique to the study because she attended a public, performing arts secondary school, where it might be expected that a more creative, flexible, or expansive curriculum would be enacted. However, it is telling that she expressed a complete denial of queer identities (or Other marginalized identities) in her schooling. Extending from her analysis of intersectionality politics and the implications for Others by including marginalized voices, histories, and contributions in secondary schools, Megan went on to speak directly to her AP history teacher in her letter about what this silencing might mean for educators:

You know how disgusted we feel by teachers who ignored Black history before it was formally introduced into the curriculum? I think that’s how people will feel in 20 years about the complete lack of queer education in schools right now. You never directly attacked me with words or threats but your ignorance of my identity opened the floodgates for my fellow students to do so. Looking back I can see how misrepresented I was in history, in health education, and even in arts education. Stop lying to students and stop ignoring them. If it was rumored that Abe Lincoln was gay, tell us. If there was a sexual identity protest, tell us. If there’s queer subject matter in literature, TELL US. There’s this all-inclusive No Child Left Behind bullshit that is peddled at us, but left and right students are being left behind.

Participants continually brought up the idea that we are in profound moment in U.S. history where campaigns for queer identities and rights are being forged and public schools need to take the steps now to be on the right side of history.

**Self-Education**

Because almost all participants received no direct instruction on queer topics from their secondary school experiences (with the exception of the two participants who attended religious
schools), there was a lack of knowledge about what queer life could mean. Therefore, all participants shared their experiences of finding out about queer topics from outside the school setting (whether they sought it out or not). Jeffrey spoke to this absence in schools and his own personal pursuit of queer content during adolescence, as he recalled:

As a student the lack of access to sexual orientation materials, particularly those related to the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community, left me with many unanswered questions about myself which ultimately had to be answered by alternative means (books, Internet, etc.) that could have easily been answered if there had simply been an open dialogue allowed between students and faculty or administration.

Indeed, participants expressed that they were looking and listening for queer representations in schools, but most did not ever experience any direct interactions. Although queer topics might have peripherally been around in participants’ secondary school experiences (AP coursework, literature, textbooks), teachers never directly crossed that divide to have teachable moments with queer content. This silence or ignoring left participants to seek out information on queer topics on their own. Saj spoke to this, as he stated:

I mean, in our textbooks, there would be like a tiny little chapter insert on Stonewall riots or something like that. But, if I had not sought it out myself, I would have never heard about it or seen it myself.

Owen expressed how this silencing of queer topics in schools affected their development during adolescence, as they stated, “If I didn’t have the drive to do it myself, then I wouldn’t have gone past that and I would have been trapped in a box.”

Participants expressed many means through which they found out about queer identities, issues, literature, history, health, or culture during their adolescent years. Most participants actively sought out this information; however, some did not set out to find this content but rather stumbled upon it. Many participants expressed learning about queer topics through friends, including some same-age peers and some older queer friends who served as models/gatekeepers.
for participants in their schools or communities. Media, news, and Internet were the primary sources participants cited for their exposure to queer content during adolescence. Some participants were actively using the Internet to find online spaces to discuss and learn about queer life with others during these years. Jeremy, the oldest participant, recalled listening to the local radio channel’s dating service to learn about queer life during high school.

Literature and the written word were also sources that participants cited as spaces where they learned about queer content during their middle and high school years. Many spoke about specific books, authors, or genres that helped educate them about queer life. Others spoke about how changes in the culture (as presented through news or media) helped inform them about queer possibilities as they matriculated through secondary school. Owen remembers learning new terminology during these years, as they recalled, “Yeah, like the word queer not used as, like, an angry term. I remember that came around in high school and I was like, Whoa! New word!” Again, it is important to note that almost all participants had no direct teachings about homosexuality in schooling (much less their communities). In the pursuit of seeking out knowledge about the realities and possibilities of queer life, Jeffrey perhaps summed this process up best, as he stated, “It was kind of filling the spaces in, so to speak.”

Books and Literature

Almost all participants conveyed that they were avid readers during middle and high school. Most preferred traditional books, but at least three participants expressed finding literary outlets through online spaces (such as fan-fiction or unpublished works). Surprisingly, interactions with young adult literature were minimal or nonexistent for participants. Only one or two participants had read young adult literature during adolescence (citing series such as *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). Owen was the only participant who
remembered reading a young adult text in high school that contained a queer character (*The Perks of Being a Wallflower*).

Interestingly, many participants expressed an interest in reading classics during adolescence ranging from Chaucer to Shakespeare to Dickens. While they were aware of some homoerotic content in these texts, they did not read or enjoy these classics from a queer perspective but rather a literary standpoint. Others read (and were “mildly obsessed”) with classics and adult literature that directly contained queer content or were written by queer authors. Some of the authors that participants recalled reading and enjoying during adolescence included: Walt Whitman, Thomas Mann, Oscar Wilde, and Rita Mae Brown. During high school, Saj recalled getting into biographical texts by queer authors such as Julia Serano.

No participant expressed having access to books with queer content at school (either in teachers’ classrooms or in the school library). When asked where and how participants found titles, authors, or genres they enjoyed during adolescence, an interesting element emerged in the research: the importance of bookstores and public libraries for marginalized groups. The majority of participants spoke of going to local used bookstores, major book retailers in the nearby city, or public libraries. Although no participant directly expressed finding queer content at their local, public libraries, almost all relayed that they had gone to their community’s library avidly while growing up. Some participants remembered clandestinely perusing the gay/lesbian section of Barnes & Noble bookstores. With a lack of available titles at school or at home, bookstores and public libraries represent important spaces for queer or questioning youth because many are actively seeking out information through alternative means to school or home. Even for those participants who were not actively seeking out information on queer content
during middle or high school, the majority of participants expressed how important these outlets were for their development.

An example of the importance of bookstores and the exploration of identity was relayed through George. Again, George was receiving tremendously problematic messages about homosexuality through his secondary school experiences (and home life), but was an avid comic book fan. He recalled a story from high school when he learned that some of the X-Men characters (whom he loved) were queer and he spoke to the push and pull he experienced as a result of these contradictory messages in his life:

I remember going to Barnes and Noble and looking through the comic books for evidence of this. And seeing ones and trying to be like, is he…isn’t he? And I remember, even back then, the push/pull of kind of hoping that he was and hoping he wasn’t. And I think even then there was this…there would be this character to identify with, but not, you know?

As George continued to seek out which X-Men characters might be queer and attempted to understand what all of this meant for him during high school, he learned that the X-Men mutants were actually metaphors for contemporary marginalized groups in society. He spoke again of this push and pull he experienced during these years as he continued to find out more and more about queer identities on his own:

And then finding out about the historical context of X-Men being used as an allegory for like Civil Rights and disenfranchisement, prejudice, all that stuff for minority groups and disadvantaged groups. And how in contemporary times, X-Men is mostly used as an allegory for, you know, queer/gay rights. And that blew my mind. And finding out that he used…you know, him as the gay director and then seeing the movie and I was like, Oh man. This movie is actually about gay stuff. And that kind of blew my mind. So, I remember when going through the X-Men books and having that conundrum being like, Can I? Can’t I? I love this stuff. Is it okay to like something about people who are different than me?

George’s example of the characters and themes in X-Men being metaphors for the experiences of Others clearly illustrates that literary texts (and media) represent powerful tools that teachers and
schools should be incorporating to reach a broader, more diverse student population.

**Media**

Another avenue that participants learned about queer topics during adolescence was through media representations. Although no participant expressed consistently watching a television show or film with queer content during their middle or high school years, images of queer life still managed to seep into participants’ understanding during this time through media. In terms of television, Jeremy spoke about the importance of watching the openly queer (and HIV+) depiction of Pedro on *The Real World* in 1994. Jeremy also spoke of the importance of Madonna and Princess Diana during his adolescence and expressed that he “didn’t know what he would have done” without them. George remembers watching the youth-oriented series *Degrassi: The Next Generation* when he would get home from school and viewing an openly queer character who was beaten up in an episode. He recalled, “that was the only time I remember that I saw a non-straight representation explicitly in media.”

In focus group discussions, participants spoke about gravitating toward queer musical artists during adolescence. Participants expressed that sometimes they were drawn to these queer artists by accident and others through actively seeking them out. Notably, Jeremy is the only participant who mentioned that radio was an outlet for him during his teenaged years for learning about queer identities. George cited learning about Mary Cheney and Chaz Bono through media stories during adolescence and expressed the impact this played on his understanding of the possibilities of queer life. Additionally, George spoke about learning that one of his interests during adolescence, X-Men, was not only an allegory for queer rights, but also contained queer characters (such as Beast) and queer actors playing mutants (such as Ian McKellan and Alan
Cummings). George not only was an avid reader of X-Men during adolescence, but also spoke of the importance that the film adaptations played on his development.

An interesting aspect that developed through participants’ descriptions of learning about queer identities and life through media are the sources in which they cited. Some of the media representations are specifically about queer life, people, or history (such as learning about Pedro on The Real World or Mary Cheney being embraced as an openly queer woman and daughter of the Vice President of the U.S.). Others (such as Princess Diana and Madonna) were not necessarily coming from a queer standpoint, but rather were explicitly identified by participants as teaching them something during adolescence about queer identities through their media representations.

**Teaching Others**

Participants also relayed that they themselves often stepped into roles of educators during adolescence, as they were the ones relaying information on queer topics to others. Because almost all participants expressed a complete absence of queer identities in their middle and high school experiences, they also understood their peers and friends to be naïve or ill-informed about these topics during this time. Jeremy, one of only three participants to have been out during high school, remembers discussing his sexuality with close friends and playing the role of educator:

I had no queer friends, so to speak. But, you know, my senior year of high school I do remember talking with some of my close friends about, you know…cause they had questions that they wanted to know…they didn’t understand. And, you know, I could talk to them. And I had little to no experience at all.

Even though Jeremy did not have an in-depth understanding about what queer life encompassed or could mean during this time, he, himself, had to step into the role of educator because his close friends were interested in crossing the gap and learning more about his identity and
experiences and because their school and community silenced or ignored homosexuality altogether.

Instead of placing the onus to educate others about queer life, identities, and/or histories back on marginalized students or groups, participants were emphatic in their call for adults to be the ones taking this initiative. They all expressed that it should not have been their job or role to educate others about what it meant to be queer during adolescence; that responsibility should have been taken up by adults in their community. Owen summed this up well in the letter back to their former school system, as they wrote:

I want my queer siblings to be able to know more than Oscar Wilde. I want to be able to celebrate the sacrifice of those who participated in the Stonewall Riots with the members of my community in the future instead of having to be the one spreading the story.

All participants expressed the importance of seeing yourself (or others like you) in historical teachings and lessons and overall secondary school environments and the beneficial impact that would have on all students.

Navigating Secondary Schools as a Queer or Questioning Student

Despite the tremendous obstacles each participant faced growing up regarding understanding gender, sexual orientation, and/or identity, they all discussed the ways in which they continued to live out their lives and reject the confines of heteronormativity that they experienced in adolescence. Some participants had strong support systems to help them through this transition during adolescence while others felt completely isolated during this time. A few participants, such as Megan, spoke about the negative impact experienced during adolescence regarding gender and sexual orientation. When asked whether her experiences in middle and high school positively or negatively influenced her understanding of self, she replied, “I would
definitely say negatively. Not even just in school, but I think a lack of representation in school really made finding myself even outside of school even harder.”

This search for finding self during adolescence is common for all teenagers, but is particularly complex for marginalized individuals (particularly queer or questioning youth) to negotiate. Many spoke about lack of access to queer content and contributions they received in school leading them to seek out this information on their own to further enhance their development of self. A conversation from the in-state focus group illustrates this point:

Saj: Overall, I would say it probably had a negative impact, because it took me a little longer. I think that if I had been exposed to more ideas about bisexuality and all that, I would have been more comfortable with the idea of-okay, maybe that is what I fit in. But, since it never came up, in the sort of historical context, like, was in the history books and English books-even though it was there, we just never talked about it. If I had not had the initiative to go do it myself, I can’t imagine how much longer it would have taken me.

Owen: I’m going to agree with that. Yeah, it sort of defined limits for stuff. Because it was always in definitions of gay and lesbian as opposed to, like, bisexuality…pansexuality…trans* identity. So, I’d say the same. If I didn’t have the drive to do it myself, then I wouldn’t have gone past that and I would have been trapped in a box.

This conversation illustrates how participants fully recognized that queer identities were being silenced, ignored, and/or marginalized in their schools. Because of this erasure, participants took matters into their own hands to explore and attempt to understand the possibilities of their queer identities during adolescence.

Interestingly, almost every single participant indicated that the experiences and support they received during adolescence pertaining to queer identities (although negative at the time) ultimately had a positive influence on their development. Jeremy, who came out earlier than all other participants at age 16 in his small town community, spoke about the resilience he learned through his experiences in adolescence:
You know, at the time, you feel all alone and you have nothing. It’s like being in a foreign land. There’s nothing. I definitely learned that I can do something if I put my mind to it. And, you know, I can do something by myself. I don’t have to have the world helping me or telling me what to do. I can be my own person. You know, it’s not easy. But, it can be done. That’s probably the biggest lesson.

This idea of finding support through doing something yourself, against the norm of your school or community, was reiterated by other participants. Jeffrey (also out during high school) spoke about the high academic expectations he strived for, while still trying to fill the gap on his own:

I think it still was, in a way, very much self-empowering. Because it gave me the opportunity to still develop that side of myself and still pursue my academics the way that the school expected me to so that I could still excel by their standards while still holding on to that, *Hey-I’m doing this under the radar until I’m able to be me while still being this person that they were expecting me to be.*

While participants continually reinforced that they did not want future generations of queer or questioning youth to have to experience the silencing, marginalization, or fear that they (and countless others) have experienced through secondary schooling, they also spoke about the ways in which their development was enhanced through the process. George illustrated this point, as he discussed his experiencing negotiating this push and pull:

I mean, the easy answer is negatively, obviously. But, at the same time, I do think there was some element of the struggle through all that made me a stronger person. And, over time, coming into contact with the push/pull between what I was feeling in myself and not wanting to recognize and what I was being explicitly taught, I think that really forced me to kind of look at the world in a different way. So, had I had something in school or people I could have talked to…anything, I would have gotten there faster. So, it’s negative and positive.

Again, while participants explicitly called for the full inclusion of queer content and support structures in secondary schools, they also acknowledged the strength, resilience, and individualistic qualities that they have developed as a result of their experiences. A conversation from the out-of-state focus group illustrates this point:
Loki: I mean, I didn’t encounter anything. So, it was more like taking away possibilities. I never really knew who I was until I got into college. I think maybe that might have stifled that a little bit. I still don’t really know. So, that might be something.

Calliope: Yeah, I think as an adolescent, it was probably a very negative impact, but ultimately a positive impact. Similar to what you said, like in middle school and high school—limiting opportunities of who you can be, how you can express yourself. And as long as being gay wasn’t an option—not even just living openly but admitting it to yourself—as long as that was not an option, that made being a teenager suck in a lot of ways. But I think ultimately, I mean, as cheesy as it sounds, what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, you know? So, the lessons you learn from going through things like that, there’s always value to them. So, ultimately I guess, positives can come out of anything and definitely have. But at the time, it was a negative impact, for sure.

Loki: That’s definitely true. I think I developed a more unique personality. I never felt like I had to be like anyone else cause I knew I that wasn’t.

*The Closet and Disclosure*

Of the nine participants in this study, only three were out during middle or high school. All of them spoke about the lack of visible queer models in their schools or communities in which they could have seen the possibilities of healthy, happy, and diverse queer identities. It was not an option for most participants to come out during adolescence because of the silencing of queer content in schools, the lack of recognition by teachers and institutional spaces of their situated, embodied perspectives, and the inadequate visibility of queer models in their lives. More importantly, the majority of participants expressed not even being able to articulate anything queer in their lives during this time even to themselves. Calliope demonstrated this point well:

I wasn’t out in high school or middle school. And, there was a reason why. There wasn’t a place to do it. There were plenty of people who were suspected of being gay, who later came out as gay. But the extent of bullying that they suffered just for being suspected of being gay really discouraged anyone from coming out. There was not a single out student at my school. I guess because homosexuality was so invisible in my community, unless it was fire and brimstone. You know, unless they were telling you you were going to hell or that you were just some ass-less chaps person roller blading down Main Street. Those were the only two images that were available. So, I think to most of us…I know several other people from my high school who have come out since. I think to
most of us the idea that we could stop being gay was a much more of a realistic possibility than coming out and than living comfortably, happily as gay. So, like my thinking never got to the point of, Oh, who can I tell? If that makes sense. Living openly gay wasn’t an option to even consider. So, coming out…I never thought about someone to come out to.

Further examples of participants’ delayed understanding of self during adolescence came from Loki. Even though she had experienced some same-sex relationships or interactions during middle and high school, Loki spoke to how the oppressive structures in her life combined with a lack of visible queer models affected her development:

   I didn’t even get in touch with that part of my sexuality until I was in college. It wasn’t until I was in college until it dawned on me, like, oh, this is okay to do. I can like females. They’re pretty *(laughs)*. That’s okay. But in high school it was mostly like: this is taboo and my parents can never find out. But before that, it was not a thing for me. It was just like that part of the world didn’t even exist.

   While the coming out process is complex, is specific to an individual’s experience, and is something that should never be forced on someone by others, the fact that most participants remained closeted until after leaving their secondary school experiences is telling. Certainly remaining in the closet (to self and others) helped many of the participants protect themselves through their middle and high school experiences (at school, home, and their communities). Another element that helped those participants who were out during their secondary school years was strategically choosing to whom they should disclose information. For the three participants who were out during high school (and for some who remained closeted during these years), they all spoke about learning who to trust. Some were out to peers during this time, including other queer friends or straight allies. Jeffrey recalled the close-knit community he found in marching band where there was a group of out students:

   Most of us were out to other band members and whatnot. It might not have been a school-wide thing, but to the other likeminded individuals being all part of the same organization, we were more like family to each other than the rest of the student population.
Every single participant spoke about teachers they trusted and felt supported by in their middle and high schools. Yet, none of the participants reported having a teacher or adult at school to whom they could go with questions they had about gender or sexual orientation. When asked whether he had access to a supportive teacher during these years, Saj responded:

Not likely. There’s some instructors or teachers who I was close to, but as far as me going to them about any issues regarding my gender or my sexuality, no. I would have never made that step, I don’t think.

Combined with the lack of inclusion of queer content in curricula and instruction, the invisibility of positive, diverse, healthy queer role models, and the absence of teachers or adults at school that they could confide in, it is understandable that all of the participants in this study needed to negotiate or suppress coming out of the closet and strategically think about who to disclose things to during adolescence.

**Messages Received**

Many of the messages that participants received in adolescence about the possibilities of being in the world have previously been discussed. Some of these messages include: not having an understanding of the possibilities of queer identities due to the lack of visible queer models that were healthy, happy, and diverse; not having a sense of historical context for the contributions and lives of queer people; and not having access to a space or individual they could go to with questions about gender or sexual orientation without fear of disclosure to parents or others. Every single participant spoke to the formal and informal codes and rules that monitored and regulated their secondary schools. As Jeffrey explained, “Oh yeah. It was very much, you know, the rules were there and everyone was expected to follow them-faculty included.”

Indeed, many of the participants spoke about the need to fit in and fly under the radar during middle and high school in order to not draw suspicion to them and face persecution or
ostracism. Jeffrey, and a few other participants, spoke about the specific messages he received in his small, Southern community. Because a sense of place and community are so critical to Southern cultures, according to Jeffrey, questions and explorations of his sexuality during these years made him feel different or outside of his community. He explained:

Especially here in the South where we take a great pride in where we come from. If you’re queer identified and you’re in the South and you don’t have access to these things, then you don’t have a sense of where you come from. Therefore, you have no history.

As a way to feel included in the school and local communities and not draw unnecessary attention to themselves during adolescence, many participants discussed their reliance on academic achievements and success. George discussed some of the messages he received in adolescence regarding academic success and following rules and your principles, while still denying part of your identity:

So, I was the good kid. I was the kid who followed the rules. I was the kid who never was disrespectful. I was the kid who gave authority to the teachers. I didn’t question authority or anything. I was the kid who always did the “right” thing, you know? I was like Mr. Honesty…which, that is the one thing that I will say that I got out of my upbringing that I still stay really close to is the value and importance of honesty and genuineness. Which, ironically, they would say, like, be honest and be genuine, but don’t talk about that gay thing. Be yourself, as long as you’re not gay.

Every single participant discussed the ways in which they had to follow these formal and informal rules in order to navigate middle and high school. Whether learned from home, community, media, or school, all participants’ understanding about how to be in the world (particularly regarding gender and sexuality) played out at school. Jeffrey considered the messages that he received at school regarding these rules and the possibilities of identity:

It was still kind of that mentality of: remember that this is the way that works and this is how this works. So, stay within these guidelines and you’ll be fine. There was still that kind of edge of you don’t want to go outside the box. Or if you do, don’t go step too far outside that box. You know, bend the rules, don’t break them.
Regardless of whether each participant was out during adolescence (such as Jeffrey, who still learned not “to go outside the box”), they all discussed the ways in which they had to suppress or negotiate the rules of their schools in order to survive. Megan, who had same-sex relationships during adolescence but was not out, spoke to what might have happened if she did chose to bend or break the rules of her performing arts secondary school:

I think that the message was largely: You can be different and you can be who you are, within the confines of this. There’s a very indirect message of: there are limits to how different you can be. And the norm was a little bit broader than it was in a public school. But there were still definite boundaries that you didn’t cross. And one of those was being flamboyantly queer. So, I mean, no one ever said to me, Hey, I know your secret. And you’re in a lot of trouble. They never approached me directly to tell me that it was wrong. But, I feared that if I would have been openly-gay with my girlfriends at that time, that I would have been treated differently.

According to participants, students at their middle and high schools who stayed within the confines of the rules and boundaries placed upon them were more readily rewarded or at least did not face punishment or ostracism. Jeffrey spoke to what could happen if a student crossed those boundaries or broke the rules during middle and high school:

You would be slapped on the wrist for being subversive…disgusting…deviant subject matter. Or that you would inadvertently be called into question for being, you know, in danger of falling under certain life paths that would be otherwise considered to be objectionable.

Perhaps stories like the one LC recalled from secondary school further drove these rules and boundaries into the consciousness of participants during adolescence as they learned to hide parts of themselves in order to survive:

The only person that I ever remember trying to date a person of the same sex in high school got shipped off to the military and the other girl was the youth minister’s daughter at the church and they left town.

The only available option for almost every single participant was to try to fly under the radar, to focus on academic success, and/or try to follow the rules in order to survive middle and high
school. According to Megan, “Flying under the radar would entail not expressing yourself at school.”

The most direct messages that participants received pertaining to queer identities during secondary schools came from Loki and George, who each attended private, religious schools that directly addressed homosexuality in a negative context. Loki was taught by her teacher in social justice class that being homosexual was like eating dirt. George’s school curricula, teachers, and staff continually presented queer identities or topics as a sin, according to their beliefs and rules, as he explained:

The only awareness I had, at that age in like middle school and high school, was it’s bad. It’s a sin. You can’t do it, so keep your distance. Unless you’re going to be fighting the good cause for God and Christianity. We watched so many videos about why the gays are going to go to hell and why, like, if you’re not straight it’s bad. It’s going to be bad for you. It’s gonna bring, like, tragedy down on everyone you know. I mean, really they had us thinking…without saying so much, the context was essentially, like, it’s going to rain hellfire and brimstone down on you and your family and everyone you love if you ever do that.

While receiving messages equating homosexuality with “hellfire and brimstone” as an adolescent might seem extreme, it is important to note that other participants in this study (who did not attempt religious schools) also experienced similar teachings during these years.

**Survival Strategies**

Participants touched on the ways in which they continued to live out their lives and survive while navigating their middle and high school years. Many of them spoke of supportive parents, teachers, and friends who helped them during these years. Loki cited her parents as helping her survive adolescence because they never limited her possibilities and instilled in her the idea of “never being told that I couldn’t do something.” Jeremy, who was out at age 16, spoke about finding support through media outlets, such as radio, music, television, and film, as he described:
You kind of grow up that way, you know, when you’re the only person…I had no known gay relatives…nothing. I mean, it’s just me. And the closest people I had was, like, Madonna. (laughter) And Princess Diana. I mean, that’s it! And, you know, you just kind of have to be tough and do what you have to do.

For participants, part of doing “what you have to do” to survive adolescence as a queer or questioning youth involved seeking out information and avenues on your own in order to learn about the possibilities in their lives.

Another element that participants brought out was the crucial need for finding supportive friends and allies to help navigate these years. Jeffrey spoke about finding a core group of trusted friends during these years that helped him survive adolescence:

I think it was having—however small it may have been—having that succinct but intimate network of people that I could trust. And then couple that with the self-initiative to discover new things and to deal with the void, so to speak. And at the same time, that persistent urge to, you know, self-preserve and survive the nightmare that is high school anyway. So, I mean, I think it’s a combination of the individual coupled with a support network of some sort—regardless whether it be a support network of 100 or it be a support network of 3.

Almost every single participant discussed the importance of having supportive friends and outlets (either in school, in community, or online) during adolescence in order to “deal with the void” and find acceptance in others. However, for a school context, part of the survival strategies participants explored revolved around following the rules in order to not draw attention to themselves. George spoke to the negotiation he experienced in secondary school:

As long as my sense of self was on the party line, yeah. I think I had lots of it. But, if it deviated from it, there wasn’t anybody that I could think of that I could have gone to and talked to about that without being pathologized or vilified. But, yeah, I think it was most explicitly about success, but I think there was some level of subconscious idea of it was about survival. It was like, Be this way to be successful and anything else you will die (laughs), was sort of the unwritten, unspoken.

The conflicting messages and silencing of queer identities participants experienced in adolescence led them to seek out varying ways to survive their middle and high school years.
When asked what was the largest contributing factor to them successfully navigating adolescence, many participants spoke about the desire and ambition to get out of high school and their hometowns, as soon as possible, without looking back.

When discussing survival strategies they tapped into during their middle and high school experiences, participants in the out-of-state focus group engaged in a thoughtful conversation about relying on lies and secrets during these years. The following conversation took place when participants were asked if they, themselves, played a role in navigating or surviving their secondary school experiences:

Calliope: I’m really good at telling lies. But, it’s also a bigger lie to live one. And so, it makes just telling lies so much easier, if that makes sense.

Loki: When you have to act it out, it’s different.

Calliope: Yeah.

Loki: You become a really good actor.

Calliope: Absolutely.

Loki: You’re probably the best actor because you had to.

Whether telling general lies or lying about your identity, this point is particularly salient for queer or questioning youth who must navigate oppressive, homophobic, and/or heteronormative spaces. The ideas participants shared about survival strategies in adolescence such as needing to lie, acting a part, or suppressing part of your identity certainly are congruent with the stigmatized exposure to queer content they each experienced during these years.

Some participants had more support than others and some had different survival strategies than others. Even with outlets for support during these years from family, friends, school, or online, many participants still faced an arduous journey. For Megan, the depression and oppression she felt in adolescence manifested in feelings of suicide. When asked what
helped her navigate these years, she cited simply surviving as the main source of perseverance through these years:

I honestly don’t think there was one. I had a lot of problems with depression and suicide in middle school and high school. And, I think the most successful factor was me just not knowing how to kill myself the right way. *(laughs)* I just didn’t do it right. And that was the only thing that really got me through things. I was too naïve to know how to really hurt myself.

Megan’s thoughts eloquently illustrate the complexities and resiliency of surviving adolescence for many queer or questioning youth.

*Finding Spaces and Support*

Another avenue that helped participants navigate or survive was through finding spaces and support that helped them during these years, as George explained, “I mean, first and foremost, I think it was knowing I had people to support me.” Many of the participants cited their families as the main source of support they received during adolescence. As Jeremy explained:

Well, the thing that was different about my family was, my family always taught me to, you know, we’ll love you no matter what. Be yourself. They’ve always wanted me to try and get me into music and draw—just anything that I wanted to do. Just do it. Just try it.

While Jeremy’s story is unique because he was out during high school and felt support from his family during these years, it is also crucial to understand the importance of familial support during these years for queer or questioning youth. No other participant relayed having specific support from their families pertaining to their gender expression or sexual orientation during adolescence.

Almost every single participant spoke of supportive teachers and adults at school they had access to during adolescence. Some of these teachers embraced diversity, taught about bigotry in their lessons, and created safe spaces for their students. However, no participant
reported ever having teachers speak about homophobia or explicitly relaying to students that queer identities were welcomed and accepted in their classrooms. Megan spoke about an English teacher she had who was supportive and welcoming in her performing arts secondary school:

The English teacher, she was kind of stern, but she was very open and nice to students who she knew worked hard. So, I definitely felt more welcomed by her because I had this overachiever thing. So, she knew that I was going to do my work and she was always very cordial and sweet to me.

Again, participants definitely knew they had supportive teachers or adults they could trust on some levels in school, but also recognized that they must follow the rules and/or suppress their gender or sexuality in order to receive said support. Calliope illustrated this point further:

My teachers were great teachers…incredibly supportive. I mean, encouraging anything you wanted to do. And they weren’t outwardly discouraging of homosexuality. There just was no mention at all. Like it didn’t exist.

Many participants discussed the importance of other queer or questioning peers in their schools or communities. Those participants who were out during secondary school found other queer friends or allies who offered them a supportive space to discuss issues or questions. Jeffrey discussed some queer upperclassmen who had gone before him at his high school and helped pave the way for him in terms of finding teachers and outlet of support. Calliope remembered a student at her school participating in the annual commemoration of the National Day of Silence and Saj recalled a student wearing a purple shirt for the annual commemoration of Spirit Day. Neither Calliope nor Saj recollected any negative responses from peers or faculty at their respective schools. Although these student-led initiatives went under the radar and were largely ignored by students, according to Calliope and Saj, certainly their memories of these students helped each understand the support that was available to them in their lives.
With the exception of Jeremy who graduated high school in 1998, almost every single participant cited the importance of the Internet as a venue for support during adolescence. Many sought out information on queer topics during these years while others stumbled upon queer topics accidentally. Some participants were engaging in online chat rooms for queer people during these years while others were consuming queer fan-fiction online. Reading was also a main source of support for all participants during adolescence. Although no participant really read queer young adult literature during these years, almost every single participant mentioned reading a text (adult, online, comics) that had queer content during middle or high school. Participants reported reading everything from Walt Whitman to queer manga to science fiction to Oscar Wilde to queer fan-fiction during their middle and high school years. Because participants did not have access to queer content in their school libraries or on school computers, they continually stressed the importance of public libraries and bookstores as a means of support during these years.

Participants also discussed seeking out and finding spaces at school that made them feel safe and supportive, even if these spaces were not explicitly “queer friendly.” Jeffrey recalled finding out about queer information by studying for his Scholar’s Bowl competitions. George, who attended a private, religious secondary school, even found support through involvement in his international volunteer service organization’s national conferences, where he met and befriended queer teenagers and allies who helped challenge his traditional viewpoint learned at school and in his home community. Interestingly, almost every single participant cited band and chorus as a safe and supportive space for them in middle and high school. LC remembered boys doing her makeup on band trips and called show choir “a safe haven.” Although none of the participants ever remembered hearing directly from their band or chorus teachers that it was okay
to be gay, they credited their experiences in band and chorus with providing them a much needed and appreciated space for support during adolescence.

While all participants discussed finding some means of support during middle and high school that helped them navigate these years, they also fully understood the complicated nature of being a queer or questioning adolescent living within a heteronormative and homophobic society. When deliberating on the importance of these support structures during adolescence, George spoke to the constraining yet liberating negotiation of living within an oppressive space:

That same social support that was important in helping me navigate through specifically as a student, as a person in general, contributed equally as much to inhibiting me from exploring those other important parts of myself that I had the space to explore later. But, when I had the space to explore them later, it was because of the support of the people around me and getting to know openly- queer identified people.

Certainly all of the participants in this study needed the supportive spaces and people in their lives in order to survive these years. But almost as importantly, they also now recognize that they needed supportive spaces and individuals during these years that fully recognized and valued queer identities in order to help them understand the possibilities in their lives.

**Queering Identities, Histories, and Support Structures in Schools**

Every single participant expressed that queer content and contributions should be included in secondary schools’ curricula and instruction. Recommendations for specific areas and ways that schools and educators could be better incorporating queer identities and issues are explored and summarized in the next section of this chapter. However, it is important to contextualize and understand the rationales for why participants felt that queer topics should be included in middle and high schools. From calls for diverse, comprehensive curricula and pedagogical decisions to demands for adequate support services in safe school environments,
participants spoke to the myriad benefits that this inclusion would offer all members of a school community.

**Benefit for Participants**

Overall, all participants expressed repeatedly how much good it would have done in their lives to simply have been exposed to any positive representations of queer identities through their experiences in middle and high school. Many of them said that having access to queer content in curriculum and instruction within a supportive school environment would have made them feel at home and a sense of belonging. Others expressed that access to a supportive school with teachers who taught positive representations of queer identities would have helped better develop their social skills and overall interactions with peers (both in adolescence and contemporarily).

The marginalization and silencing of queer content that participants experienced in their respective secondary schools resulted in many of them feeling as if being queer was not an available option for them. Many participants felt that their experiences in schools during adolescence taught and defined for them the limits of how to be in the world. Even participants who attended untraditional secondary schools, such as Megan who attended a public, performing arts school, spoke about how the silencing of queer identities in middle and high school impacted her understanding of self:

The norm was a little bit broader than it was in a public school. But there were still definite boundaries that you didn’t cross. And one of those was being flamboyantly queer. So, I mean, no one ever said to me, *Hey, I know your secret. And you’re in a lot of trouble.* They never approached me directly to tell me that it was wrong. But, I feared that if I would have been openly-gay with my girlfriends at that time, that I would have been treated differently. There’s a message of: there are limits to how different you can be.
Other participants relayed that being exposed to positive queer representations in school would have helped open up the possibilities for them to understand different ways of being and who they could be in the world.

Many participants spoke about not realizing who they were until college. Adolescence and college years are assuredly times of exploration in our lives, but what is particularly salient about this point is the awareness that participants had about the limits of identity that were available to them (through school, community, family, and society). LC, who did not come out until age 25—the oldest of all participants, continually reinforced how her upbringing had defined the limits of who she could be, as she said, “Awareness helps a lot. But I was just unaware. Of a lot of things apparently.” Participants repeatedly called for positive representations and interactions with queer content in secondary schools because it would have helped them in this exploratory stage of their lives as they struggled to fit in. In her letter to her former schools, Calliope spoke to this, as she wrote:

If only I could have read a single book with a single gay character—just to help me IMAGINE what a gay life might look like. Or if only I could have heard someone talk about homosexuality in a positive way without getting struck by lightning.

Saj reinforced this idea and spoke about the delayed understandings of self he experienced growing up transgender in a school that silenced queer identities:

I think that if I had been exposed to more ideas about bisexuality and all that, I would have been more comfortable with the idea of-okay, maybe that is what I fit in. But, since it never came up, in the sort of historical context, like, was in the history books and English books-even though it was there, we just never talked about it. If I had not had the initiative to go do it myself, I can’t imagine how much longer it would have taken me.

Again, this search and struggle for identity is a prevalent theme for all adolescents. But this exploration is particularly complex for stigmatized or marginalized groups who not only experience a silencing of their identities from some in traditional spaces within a society, but
who also face fear, intimidation, and hateful ideologies being perpetuated onto those identities from others. Megan spoke to this search for self while negotiating fear of acceptance during her adolescent years:

If I would have had any kind of positive influence…because at that age, you get home and you get school. And you don’t really get much else. And both of those were telling me: keep this a secret. Don’t try to act out on this. So, if the school can have a way make sure that no matter what’s going on at home, or what they’re being told by their classmates, that there’s at least a little bit of positive influence about being who you are and speaking out and not being afraid of threats (like I’m going to tell your mother). I would have had a lot easier time in school if someone would have reached out to me and told me that that one instance didn’t mean that I was in trouble for how I felt, or something along those lines.

Finally, many participants spoke about feeling like they did not have a history because of the lack of queer inclusion in their secondary school experiences. Not only did this hinder their development of self during these years, but they also felt like they were uninformed about the countless contributions of queer people throughout world history. Jeffrey personalized this idea and spoke about how important it is for every human to feel a sense of pride in where they come from:

It’s all part of what it means to be part of the human race. Especially here in the South where we take a great pride in where we come from. If you’re queer identified and you’re in the South and you don’t have access to these things, then you don’t have a sense of where you come from. Therefore, you have no history.

**Benefit for Queer Students**

All participants felt that there would be tremendous benefits of including queer content and support structures in secondary schools for queer or questioning students. As participants were describing their own everyday lived experiences in middle and high school, many were quick to point out that their experiences were probably similar to other queer or questioning students. Again, most participants spoke about the importance of learning about and understanding that queer people have not only existed throughout humanity, but that they have
also contributed to world civilization and cultures. Jeffrey synthesized this idea perfectly, as he stated:

I think that for the queer identified students, I think the benefits are obvious. It’s a feeling of belonging. It’s a building of community. It’s aiding in that feeling of, you know, what you’re experiencing, you’re not the only one experiencing it. It’s not wrong to experience it. And it’s been experienced for hundreds of years.

This idea of feeling a sense of belonging in a group that is either traditionally silenced or stigmatized arose in many participants, as they discussed the limits of who they could be and the lack of information about other ways of being during adolescence.

According to participants, one of the main benefits for queer or questioning students of queering secondary schools through curricula, instruction, and overall school environment would be visible access to positive queer representations. In speaking to the lack of visible models or positive representations of queer identities in middle and high school, George spoke to the importance this plays particularly in the lives of queer or questioning youth:

It goes back to that visibility piece. How can a student…like, if a student has never seen or heard anything, they feel like an alien. They feel like they’re the first person going down this path by themself, completely alone—even if they don’t have somebody that they can talk to, at least having materials and content. And tell them that they’re not the first person to walk down this path. There’s a road that’s been paved by people that you may have to find your way to, but at least you can take some comfort in the fact that there’s information out there. There’s people that look like you and they can make it.

This idea of “making it” is particularly salient, as most participants did not have access to positive representations of fully-realized queer people happily living out their lives during adolescence. George continued on about how important the visibility piece is and spoke about the contradictory messages an invisible or distorted view of queer identities often has on queer or questioning youth:

And it’s so important to have that exposure because otherwise you just…you feel like a monster. You’re basically told that you’re a monster. You’re going to be the cause of the apocalypse or something. You’re a mutant, is what you feel like. And to have people
who will look at you and say no, that’s not the case. Or to know that there are other mutants out there you can relate to and, you know…It would have made all the difference in the world.

Indeed, many participants recognized how “lucky” they had been in their lives, even if they did not have direct models or supportive structures in adolescence to help them understand queer possibilities. They spoke about other students (some they knew, others theoretically) who had a much harder time in this negotiation. Many participants spoke about school push-out for queer students and the alarmingly high rates of homeless queer youth. Participants stated that if schools were more supportive and instructive for queer or questioning students, perhaps there would not be as disproportionate numbers of them dropping out of school or being pushed out onto the streets.

Another benefit for queer or questioning youth that participants pointed to when thinking about including queer content and services in secondary schools was the support it would offer in social interactions with others. Many spoke about a lack of language (combined with a lack of visibility) in which to engage others in queer topics or issues. Because participants themselves, much less their hetero, cisgender peers or friends, often did not have the language or examples in which to discuss or explore queer identities, many felt that there was a chasm that was often difficult to bridge with others during their adolescence. Again, participants called for the onus of educating others about queer topics not to be placed on them (the marginalized Other), but rather on our educators and carried out in a holistic way that would help educate all students. A conversation participants held in the in-state focus group speaks perfectly to this idea:

LC: Just putting a human face to it. Because whether or not this is something that you identify with, if you know someone or have a face to go with it, or if it’s at least talked about, then it’s not so taboo. It’s not so weird. It’s not so distanced. It’s more personal and you can talk about it. Which is half the problem.
Owen: I might be a little too optimistic here, but I feel like most people would want to learn...they’re willing to learn, maybe. I’m going to guess there are some staunch no’s. But, there are others who are just like, they may be a little hesitant to learn about it in the beginning, but I think if they do learn about it, they would be willing to learn about it and willing to support it and everything.

Saj: Some people do have the obstacle of not wanting to be a sort of...what are the words I’m looking for here...being completely in the deep, no clue what’s going on. So, if you baby-step them through it, you might have an easier time.

LC: I feel like if anything, it can’t hurt. It can only either help or do nothing.

Owen: Right.

LC: And they may completely ignore you, but it can’t hurt.

Owen: Which, on the one hand, you’re like, why do I have to be responsible to all these people. They should do their own research.

Saj & LC: Yeah.

Owen: It’s like, come on, guys. We did it...you do it too. But, on the other hand, I do sort of see how people are just really lost and in the dark. And, I guess, they don’t think that it affects them.

Saj: And honestly, I would go so far as to say that it doesn’t even have to be, like, the person doesn’t have to be LGBT, but there are a lot of issues as far as performing gender and just performing in society according to gender roles and stuff that people who are straight and cisgender identified, I mean, they might still be dealing with issues of: I don’t really feel like this is necessary as part of my identity. So, they can still learn from the LGBT community that you can be who you are and you can express yourself as you need to. I mean, it doesn’t take away from your personhood in any way.

This discussion powerfully points to the possibilities in the push to include queer identities in secondary school environments and the work that is still ahead.

**Benefit for All Students**

In addition to the myriad ways in which including queer content and spaces in middle and high schools would have helped participants and other queer or questioning youth, participants also spoke to the benefits that this inclusion would have on all students. In her letter to all middle and high school educators, LC claimed that the strategic silencing and ignoring of queer
identities in schools “breeds ignorance. Dangerous ignorance.” Jeremy synthesized the importance of including queer identities in curricula, instruction, and support structures for all students in his letter to his former high school, as he wrote, “Queer content needs to be relayed to students so that they can receive a more well rounded education, have more diversity training skills for the real world, and give LGBTQ students a sense of belonging without feeling left out.”

Although many participants spoke about the importance of community resources and familial support for queer or questioning youth, they all agreed that schools were essential for helping foster a deeper understanding of Others through educational experiences. Calliope stressed the importance of school in this process, as she explained:

I mean, growing up, that’s where you see other people. That’s where you get your images of the world. So, I mean, home and stuff would be great, too, if parents could do that. But, as a larger solution, there’s not really any other place to start than in a school. Because attending K-12 school is mandatory and the majority of adolescent social interactions take place through our encounters with others in school, participants continued to emphasize the important roles schools and educators have on young people. Loki illustrated this point well:

I mean, even if your parents are the most open-minded, accepting…even if they are gay themselves, when you go to school and encounter people who are totally opposite, you have a certain view of society. And that’s more what influences you than really your parents’ actions, as much as they might try. It’s always the people that you’re going to grow up with, like your peers, the people you’re going to have to interact with when you’re older. So, I think it would help.

By including queer identities, histories, and literature in the curriculum and overall school environment, participants stated that all students would be exposed to discussions of Other identities, which would ultimately help humanize everyone. Saj called this “giving it a human face.” Many spoke about the need for a more open-minded consciousness that needed to be cultivated and instilled in students through school. At a bare minimum, Calliope claimed that
simply lifting the veil of silence around queer identities in secondary schools would go a long way:

It’s just so foreign to everyone…it makes it a thing. So, having more images or examples or just having homosexuality be more visible and more normalized, even. I mean, that usually has a negative connotation, but it could be a very positive thing. It just makes everyone more comfortable.

Loki spoke to the benefit that this would have not only on queer or questioning students, but also on all students within a school community:

You should learn about all these different parts of the population that you probably come in contact with everyday and have no idea about. Just being aware that there’s such a thing as being gay. It’s necessary to allow students of all identities to know that they exist—that there are others like them. Every student needs the opportunity to feel safe and accepted in their school environment.

Participants claimed that not only would the inclusion of queer content in secondary schools have benefitted their own development (and other queer or questioning youth), but it also might help all students in their understandings about the possibilities of being in the world. Jeffrey brought up the concept of inclusive curricula and schools helping all students in social interactions:

I mean, that’s going to be detrimental to their abilities to socialize on an individual level. Especially when they come across someone who is queer identified, whether it be in a college setting or a professional setting or even a relationship setting. I mean, they could end up becoming attracted to someone who later discloses that they are bisexual. How are they doing to deal with that if they’ve had no training, no exposure, no conditioning to being an open-minded, inclusive individual?

He went on to describe the larger implications that could result from adequate training involving diverse and accurate representations of the experiences of Others within supportive conditions:

For those who are not queer identified, it’s a way of opening eyes…breaking boundaries…and kind of shedding the archaic mentality of, you know, this is the line that you’re supposed to tread. And this is the line of those who don’t tread it and this is where they’re going because they don’t tread it. It’s going to erase the heteronormative idea that you have to go this way in order to end up here. Otherwise, your life’s going nowhere.
This concept is insightful because not only are participants fully conscious that queer identities were silenced or marginalized in their secondary school experiences, but they are also asserting that the inclusion of queer identities in curricula and educational programming might, in turn, erase or suppress heteronormative ideologies.

Part of the work that is necessary for queer inclusion in secondary schools, according to participants, stems from educating students about histories, literature, and language in order to foster an understanding of self and others. LC spoke to this for all students, as she claimed:

I also feel like, kind of like the news thing where it gave me a sort of dialogue. I feel like even if you are not within that spectrum, I feel like if you are aware and have the language and the tools and the knowledge, you are more equipped to discuss it and talk about it in a knowledgeable way, not just in this huge, ignorant, Southerner way. *(laughs)* LGBTQ or not, that’s something that you need in your vocabulary in general to be a nice person.

This idea of being “a nice person” came up with almost all participants when discussing the benefit of including queer content in schools for all students. Jeremy spoke of the need for realistic, in-depth understandings of diversity in secondary schools, not only for students attending middle and high schools, but also for these students once they graduate:

It helps with diversity. Diversity training. And it prepares them for the real world because, you know, in the real world, you’re going to work with all kinds of people. And, if you go to college, you’ll be exposed to all kinds of people. And, you know, it’s just a good way to get started. And have that implanted so you’re used to being around others.

Participants continually pointed to other marginalized or stigmatized groups within schools and society that also experience similar understandings of self through secondary schooling, bringing in an intersectionality argument. Through opening up curricula and school environments to all of the diverse cultures that exist within the U.S., participants persistently brought up the potential long-term implications on society, as Owen illustrated:
I think if there was attention to queer literature and other cultures in literature, like African American literature and feminist literature, the attitude towards it would be so much more educated and better. And there wouldn’t be as many…there wouldn’t be as big a problem for future generations.

Megan went into detail about how inclusive, supportive, empathetic curricula and school environments could potentially reduce bigotry and attitudes of superiority and discrimination in society:

I think it would definitely cut down on the amount of bigotry. I think one reason that it’s so easy for “normal” students to harbor hate for people who are different from them is that they are not forced by their institution to sit down and learn about these other people. And I think that makes them feel like they have a right to discriminate against them because…well, if you’re not being taught in my school, then you’re not important. So, I think that if the curriculum became more friendly and all-inclusive, it would just make the general feeling and attitude of other students to feel more inclusive. And, on a very subconscious level, it’s not going to happen overnight. But, if a student goes through—like myself—had I been heterosexual, normative. You know, if I was just a “normal” student… I didn’t identify as anything other than what is cis-normative, and I went through school the way I did, I would probably not be a very nice person towards people who are different than me. Because I just never had that experience. Now, that same student, having heard every year something about being queer or something about being of a different race or something about being a different gender identity—even if it was just one time, every single year throughout their formative years, they’re just going to be…and I don’t want to use the word conditioned, but conditioned to be more inclusive and understanding and generally nicer. I mean, when you learn about the struggles of other people, you become more empathetic towards other injustices.

This point illustrates the fact that participants are very conscious of the influence and impact of their secondary school experiences on their understanding of self and the world around them.

Reflecting back upon this understanding that he received in his conservative, religious school, George spoke about the power that educational institutions and practices play in this understanding:

I’ve long thought that the idea that being gay versus straight or like us versus them kind of issue is just completely misguided. It’s a huge fallacy. We’re humans first. And I’ve long kind of thought of it that way. And I think in the same way that I’ve benefitted from being told that racism was bad when I was younger, I think one, if people aren’t exposed to that, they’re deprived of the chance to engage with the beautiful diversity that exists in the world. Of the people around them. Of the differences. Of the opportunity to learn
about and celebrate those differences. And not necessarily have to change who they are. It’s not like we’re telling people, you have to think this way...you have to think another. But to get the opportunity to be exposed to those different things I just think opens up so many people’s minds. I mean, I am a huge…I mean, I want to go into academia. I want to teach. I’m a huge proponent of education and its power to just open up people’s minds to new ideas and help us engage in the world we live in a more meaningful, active way. And I think it would do that to everyone.

George cited research on this topic and brought in another aspect to consider when thinking about the benefits of inclusive curricula and schools for all students:

I know there’s also research that has shown that geographic locations, like towns and things, where there are more…I can’t remember if it’s more instances or if it has to do with anti-gay bullying...or some index of homophobia in these towns. There was also a correlation...obviously it’s a correlation, so we don’t know what the direction is, but there’s a correlation, and it’s actually pretty, surprisingly strong, between homophobia, this index of homophobia in towns and anti-gay bullying, something like that, and youth suicides. Period. Not just gay youth suicides. Youth suicides in general. Because it creates this environment of toxicity. And, I think, you know, who knows where we as people are going to continue to develop and open up our horizons and what things…I mean, we’re constantly learning.

Participants were certainly not naïve about the obstacles to still overcome in the pursuit of creating equitable, safe schools with realistically diverse curricula to support all students. But they also remained hopefully about the potential in this work and the roads that have already been paved. George continued on about the possibilities in this work and how we are all implicated:

But, you know, I think there was a time that people didn’t recognize that this struggle for equal rights for queer people would be a thing. There was a time that even within the queer movement, we didn’t recognize that trans* rights and trans* equality was going to be such an important thing. More and more I’m starting to hear about asexuals, demisexuals, gray-a. All that sort of stuff that I think gets lost in between the cracks. And this is just sexuality, sexual orientation focus, and gender focus. I mean, who knows what else we are going to discover about ourselves when we’re more open and when we continue to evolve and develop as a species, as a community of people, as a planet, as a world community, that we haven’t anticipated yet? And I think the more we’re open now, the more we can go to those places with each other. And there may be somebody who’s straight but like, you know, thinks in a more queer way about some other part of themselves or the world or whatever. And I think if we create more queer safe spaces, we create more safe spaces for that as well. I mean, I think it’s the same idea of why
feminism is important for men as well. There’s these messages that are insidious for everybody and I think it helps us all to deconstruct them and critically examine them in each other and in ourselves.

George’s thoughts show not only the possibilities in this work for queer or questioning youth in secondary schools, but also all students in a school community as we evolve as a society and critically examine the world around us.

**Recommendations for Schools**

Another aspect of this study aimed to engage queer college students in conversations about their experiences in middle and high school as a way to learn how secondary schools in general could provide better support to queer or questioning students. Again, all participants expressed in interviews, focus groups, and the writing prompt that schools should be open and supportive learning environments that address the identities of all of their students. Participants continually pointed out that while the visibility of queer students in secondary schools varies (some schools have openly queer students, some closeted, some questioning their gender or sexual orientation), schools have a responsibility to include queer content and contributions in curricula and create safe, supportive environments in which all students’ perspectives and needs are met. Jeffrey spoke to the idea of the responsibility of schools as a space that addresses all members of a community:

I mean, as a school-especially from an educational perspective, the school is there to cater to the community. That means the entire community. Not just the heteronormative community. Not just a certain socioeconomic bracket. The entire community. By picking and choosing what aspects of the curriculum you’re going to emphasize and what aspects of the history of the United States you’re going to emphasize, you’re not only doing a disservice to those students who are straight identified, but you’re doing a disservice to those who aren’t. Because even the ones who are straight identified, they’re not getting the full picture of what it means to be American.

Participants adamantly spoke to the need for including all perspectives in the academic programming and support structures in secondary schools. Jeffrey continued on about the
importance of this work and the need for educators and schools to be rethinking the students who attend secondary schools on a daily basis and the experiences and lessons they are being engaged in:

Schools should be open and inviting environments that include ALL perspectives of their students’ identities, not merely the ones that fit the heteronormative cookie cutter mold. Youth should feel a sense of belonging and acceptance from the moment they enter the classroom to the day of graduation and every day in between.

Participants knew from their everyday lived experiences, navigating their way through middle and high school, that many would construe what they were calling for as controversial. But interestingly, almost every single participant discussed the need to simply have diverse, positive queer representations in schools and curricula, combined with spaces that support all the students in that school. Participants did not call for a moralistic approach to teaching or discussing queer topics in schools. Rather, they just wanted to learn about queer people in history, in literature, in current events—accurately and diversely presented. Loki spoke to this point in her letter to secondary schools:

Just because you don’t agree with a lifestyle doesn’t mean you need to convince your students you’re correct. Let them be who they are and make their own life decisions. Allow room for everyone—they may not find it anywhere else. School is a place where everyone should be able to learn and be safe, and it may be the only place some students do feel safe. Realize the impact you have on the future lives of these people.

From data collected in interviews, focus groups, and the writing prompt, specific recommendations for how educators and schools could better address queer or questioning students and topics in middle and high schools were generated directly from participants. These suggestions were consolidated into five areas of improvement with corresponding recommendations for each. Table 5 outlines areas of improvement for educators and schools and specific recommendations for each that should be taken into consideration when addressing the
needs of queer or questioning students in middle and high schools. A discussion of the areas of improvement and specific recommendations follows.

Table 5

Recommendations for Secondary Schools and Teachers

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Curriculum

With the exception of George and Loki who directly learned about homosexuality in their private, religious secondary school experiences in a negative context and Owen whose history teacher told their class that the Stonewall Riots happened and “gay people did this,” none of the other participants ever directly learned about queer people, historical events, or contemporary issues in their middle and high school experiences. They all felt strongly that queer identities
and contributions should be incorporated across the board in curricula—from history classes to literature classes, from social science classes to sex education and arts education. Jeffrey spoke to this, as he stated:

Well first of all, in the schools including the queer legacy that is part of American history in the curriculum. Include it in the history curriculum. Include it in the literature curriculum. Include it in the sex ed classes. These are all part of the human condition. It’s all part of what it means to be part of the human race.

Again, participants did not necessarily want a spotlight on queer content and contributions in curricula as an isolated category. Rather, they all simply wanted to learn about the factual legacy of queer people throughout history and contemporary issues that queer people face that is diversely reflected in secondary school curricula.

**Accurate History**

From the persecution of queer people in the Holocaust to the Stonewall Riots of 1969, participants spoke repeatedly of the indignation they felt from the lack of exposure they each received in academic upbringing in middle and high school pertaining to queer content and contributions throughout history. Some participants learned about individuals and events in queer history during adolescence by researching on their own and self-teaching themselves. Others did not learn about these people or contributions until college. As Calliope asked, “Why did we not learn about Stonewall in history class? Or Harvey Milk?” Again, participants were not calling for a moralistic discussion about these issues in schools, but rather an accurate portrayal in secondary school curricula that exposed all students to the reality of the world. A discussion from the out-of-state focus group illustrates this point:

Loki: Like, our history textbooks in schools in America have a lot of things missing from them. I distinctly remember something in our textbook about pop culture. And I was thinking, why is there space for this? What are we missing here? There’s so many things that people take out of textbooks—or take out of history, basically. It’s like taking history out of the minds of this collective generation. Why not just let them have the
information? They don’t have to agree with you. You don’t have to agree with all of these things. You can say that it’s bad, but at least let them, like, experience it. Let them know that something happened.

Calliope: I absolutely agree with that. Even without taking a political stance on gay rights, or a moral stance on homosexuality, it is a fact that gay people exist without being struck by lightning.

Loki: We’re not magical.

Calliope: So, you’re not saying anything controversial or debatable to, like, just let an image exist of a gay person. Or to have a book in the library with a gay character. It’s not something that’s debatable. Like, you can’t say that you’re against it, so it doesn’t exist. It absolutely does. It’s a fact. So, these aren’t political moves or anything. It’s just representing the world accurately.

This idea of accurately representing the world in secondary school curricula was reiterated by every single participant.

All participants discussed the benefits that they would have received in their lives if they had simply learned about positive, diverse queer people in history while they were in middle and high school. They also fully recognized that queer people and events throughout history were strategically silenced or ignored in their secondary schools’ curricula and felt resentment from this erasure. As Megan charged to her former history teacher in her letter, “Stop lying to students and stop ignoring them. If it was rumored that Abe Lincoln was gay, tell us. If there was a sexual identity protest, tell us.” Megan also discussed the importance that seeing diverse, positive models of queer identities in secondary schools could have on a queer or questioning adolescent. She imagined queer or questioning high school students learning about the speculation of President Lincoln’s homosexuality and thinking, “Wow! If one of the greatest leaders of the United States was queer, well then why the hell can’t I be queer?” Indeed, the lack of models and understanding of queer people and events throughout history experienced by
participants directly impacted their perspectives and understandings about not only historical accuracy, but also the possibilities in their lives during these years. Participants knew very well the benefit that they (and other queer or questioning students) would have received by simply learning about the diverse legacy of queer history in schools. However, they also understood the benefit that this would offer all students, and the damage that the erasure of queer content or contributions has on everyone. In her letter to all middle and high school educators, LC discussed the stakes that are at play for all students:

History classes should discuss issues, as well. Just like most other “minorities” mentioned within the parameters of these classes, knowledge is key. It is key to moving forward, it is key to not repeating, it is key to understanding one’s place within society. Issues need to be discussed in order to promote understanding—both for the LGBTQ student and his peers. By acting as though this topic does not exist—which is precisely how you have acted—you are breeding ignorance. Dangerous ignorance.

Part of what participants called for was simply the inclusion of queer people and events throughout history in secondary school curricula. But another element comes from their understanding that by including such diverse histories and identities in schools, we open the doors for understanding Others and cross-cultural exchanges can be better explored. George rejected how diverse perspectives were presented to him in his religious secondary school as he called for the inclusion of all marginalized perspectives in secondary school curricula:

I mean, my school, they just about said Muslims have never done anything…contributed to anything worldwide. I’m like, are you kidding me? We wouldn’t have some of the knowledge we have if it wasn’t for some of the libraries that they protected. Are you kidding me? It’s just outright lies. You’re doing the same kind of thing with queer authors and scientists. I mean, it’s the same thing with women as well. Like, recognizing the contributions of women and people of color throughout history and into the arts and sciences. When it’s relevant to the curriculum…but, it’s relevant to, I think, most things.

Not only would this inclusion help students better understand the diversity of world history, but it would also help humanize Others and help curtail the proliferation of lies, misinformation, and distortions of the contributions of marginalized peoples and groups.
**Literary Contributions**

Participants spoke to the need for English/Language Arts classes in middle and high schools to include texts in the formal curriculum that were written by or about queer identities. Although some participants did read texts with queer content or by queer authors at school (such as Sappho’s poetry or an Oscar Wilde play), none of the participants reported ever learning about the context behind these texts or authors’ biographical information directly from their teachers. In short, participants directly called for the inclusion of diverse, positive representations of queer literature and informational texts in formal curriculum in middle and high schools. As Jeffrey put it, “the literary legacy of queer writers should be celebrated and not swept under the rug” in secondary schools.

While the participants called for the inclusion of diverse texts and biographical information covering the queer spectrum, they did not necessarily call for a separate course on Queer Studies or a spotlighted inclusion that would draw further attention to them. Loki spoke to this point, as she stated:

> I mean, starting, they could just actually have literature available or information. I mean, I don’t think that any high school is going to introduce some kind of Queer Studies class, like universities do. But, definitely try to include some of those authors and some of the things that have been written.

Indeed, simply including these texts and authors in schools would go a long way. But participants were also quick to point out that this inclusion needed to be done in such a way that did not further misinform students or present a flawed representation of queer identities. As George put it, “Assign books by queer authors or about queer characters that don’t pathologize or vilify them.”

With the proliferation of diverse, quality texts that are written by or for queer perspectives (especially in the genre of young adult literature), schools and educators have more
opportunities than ever to incorporate these texts into secondary school curricula. Interestingly, participants continued to view the larger phenomenon from an intersectionality approach that recognized how all marginalized people are affected by oppressive conditions. They did not want queer literature included haphazardly, nor did they want it incorporated at the expense of other texts that addressed the diverse identities of Others that attend secondary schools as well. Participants also called for the inclusion of texts and information from African Americans, Muslims, women, and Others in all secondary schools as a way to address the needs of all students in a school community and to foster empathy and understanding across boundaries. In her letter, LC synthesized this idea, as she stated, “English classes should include queer literature, in the same way that they should (better) integrate feminist, African American, etc. literature.”

**Arts Education**

The fact that the majority of participants conveyed the importance of band and chorus in their development and understanding of self during these years is an important finding. Although their respective band directors or choir teachers did not explicitly communicate that this was a safe space for queer or questioning students, participants continually reinforced the idea that band and chorus offered them a safe, enriching environment in which to find friends and support. Again, participants spoke about band and chorus being a space in their secondary schools where they could confide in other queer or questioning peers and simply be themselves (such as LC’s example of the boys doing her makeup on band trips).

Participants also recognized that arts education is being cut from public schools across the country and the support for these programs is typically not seen as important as academic coursework or athletic programming in middle and high schools. However, from drama to band
to visual arts to chorus, participants emphasized that spaces for arts education in secondary schools desperately need cultivation and protection in order to offer all students an outlet for free expression in a safe and supportive environment. George offered excellent recommendations for arts education, as he explained:

Do some fun things like, you know, gender-blind casting in school plays or something like that. I remember Chris Colfer talking about one of the things he was proudest about in high school, he wrote and directed and starred in a gender-swapped version of *Sweeney Todd*. It was *Shirley Todd* and I think he played like the Mr. Lobbock character. Do some stuff like that. But you don’t even have to gender-swap the characters if you didn’t want to. Drama can be a really safe space for kids. And, I mean, arts education is being eroded left and right, but it needs to be protected like you’re Gollum and it’s your precious. It’s so important because arts has long been sort of that safe haven for creative thinkers and those of us who are kind of outside the box. Even if we’re not artsy per se, it’s a place where we can go and express part of ourselves, even if it’s not directly or explicitly. It’s a place to explore and it’s a place to sort of understand what’s unique about yourself and the people around you and what’s shared. So, you know, arts classes. Music. Choir. Show choir. Band. Theatre. Drama. Musical theatre. Visual arts. Those should just never be on the chopping block. If anything, we should always be looking for way to expand and enrich those.

At a time during which arts education is undervalued and underfunded in our society, the participants in this study offer compelling recommendations for the ways that these classes should be supported and conducted in secondary schools.

**Sex Education**

Every single participant spoke about the crucial need for diverse, accurate, and adequate instruction in sex education in secondary schools. Some participants did not receive any sex education in school (other than coaches teaching health classes), while others learned about sex strictly from an abstinence-only framework in middle and high school. None of the participants reported ever learning directly about anything other than heteronormative sex from a teacher or from their experiences in sex education classes. All experiences with sex education in middle and high school that participants recalled solely dealt with male/female interactions (and, again,
was typically framed in an abstinence-only context). Perhaps teachers get away with not including concepts of queer sex (or safe-sex in general) in sex education classes in middle and high school because they might claim there are no queer students in their schools. However, George beautifully spoke to the importance of diverse and accurate sex education in secondary schools for all students:

Teach sex education!! Abstinence only education should be illegal. Oh my God! Teach good sex education and make it inclusive. Make it inclusive. Assume that every classroom you have queer and non-queer identified students. Assume you have students who are or who will one day be trans-identified. And teach to all of them. Stop splitting everything based on boys and girls, too. Everything is so fucking gendered.

This idea of teaching adequate sex education to all students in a school (whether they are queer, questioning, or will one day be) was reinforced by all participants in the study. Similarly to the erasure of queer identities in other curricular areas, participants knew from their everyday lived experiences the damage that the silencing of queer sex can have on people. In her letter, Megan called on her schools to truthfully recognize the spectrum of diversity with sex education:

Educate us formally about queer individuals and about sexual health that pertains to people other than the cisgendered heterosexual. Tell us how to be safe in missionary, and then tell us how to be safe in anal. Sidestepping a sexual act won’t keep a student from doing it. Tell us the truth and include the spectrum of sexual and gender identity in your next lesson plan.

Participants knew from first hand experiences that the erasure of queer identities in sex education does not magically prevent adolescents from engaging in sexual interactions. A conversation from the in-state focus group illustrates this point:

Owen: Well, first of all, there needs to be quality sex education in Alabama.

LC: Oh my god, yes!

Owen: Because that doesn’t exist. We didn’t get that in my high school.

Saj: Y’all had sex education in your high school? Wow!
Owen: No—we didn’t. It was, like, in health class. And there was supposed to be sex education in there, but there wasn’t.

LC: We had kind of a sex ed in middle school. And it was disastrous.

Owen: Yeah.

LC: There was, like, a preacher there talking about abstinence.

Owen: We had that in, like, elementary school.

Parks: Where they separate the boys from the girls?

Owen & LC: Yeah.

Owen: Until you get married. Abstinence until you got married.

LC: Oh, yeah! And then it’s fine. But, only in the dark after six pm. *(laughter)*

Owen: Right!

LC: That’s it.

Owen: Very boring. But, there needs to be sex ed. There needs to be acknowledgement, which—I don’t know what the law is and everything—but, just an acknowledgement that hey—people are going to fool around. And they’re not always going to be one male-identified and one female-identified. You need to realize that—it happens. But, there definitely needs to be a space for some sort of safety discussion. And, the hard thing with it being in the South is that you can’t really advertise that very well because people are going to put up posters and people will take them down or write all over them. Like, it happens in my school—at least my high school. And so, it’s kind of hard to think about where and how to get it set up.

The availability, framing, and implementation of sex education in K-12 schools are highly contested issues and vary according to geography and policy. Participants were fully cognizant of this viewpoint, but continually reinforced the need to include queer perspectives into the framing of sex education. Regardless of the uneasiness or aversion by some to adequately and diversely educate secondary students about sex, participants understood the critical importance of this inclusion for the health and education of all students. Megan
articulated specific areas to consider when thinking about how to best engage adolescents in sex education in middle and high schools:

I think the first and foremost place is going to be in sex education. Because if you don’t teach using condoms for health protection—past just pregnancy protection—a queer individual might not know, hey—if I’m going to put it in someone’s butt, I should probably wrap it. Because even though they can’t get pregnant, there are still risks there. So, just from a really practical standpoint, in health education, I think that would be very pertinent. I wish that I would have known that you can orally give someone else cold sores. I didn’t know that. I didn’t know they could be passed from mouth to genitals. Had no idea. I really wish somebody had told me that fingernails are not a good idea. Fingernails are a terrible idea. And that stems directly from the porn industry because a lot of lesbian porn is geared towards males. And so, they’ll have those long fingernails. And those are not a good idea. (laughs) I wish that somebody would have thought about the ways that teenagers and queer teenagers actually had sex and taught from that instead of teaching from the book.

Participants all spoke to the need to directly address queer identities in sex education classes in secondary schools and offered recommendations for ways to do so without distorting, erasing, or marginalizing queer bodies.

**Social Sciences**

Although participants did not offer many explicit examples, they all felt that queer content should be included across the curriculum (not simply in history and English/Language arts classes). Some participants spoke about the contributions of queer people in the field of science. Because they had never learned about queer perspectives in science classes, psychology classes, or civics classes, participants again felt like they had missed out on something in their academic development from their middle and high school years. As Jeffrey charged to all teachers in his letter, “Dare to break the silence and incorporate queer history into the social science curriculum.”

According to participants, perhaps one of the best places to start incorporating queer perspectives or ideas into social sciences curricula in secondary schools could be in psychology.
or sociology classes. Because these classes deal with individual understandings and social interactions, there are many ways in which queer content could be incorporated in the curriculum. George spoke to this idea, as he stated, “In psychology you can talk about prejudice and discrimination and gender and sexuality and development of sexuality and sexual orientation.” In addition to calling for the inclusion of queer content and contributions in history, literature, and sex education, participants recognized that social science classes would be an appropriate and useful place to begin helping students understand some of the larger issues at play in the development of gender and sexual orientation for individuals living within a heteronormative and often homophobic society.

Instruction

Participants also provided recommendations for better addressing the identities and perspectives of queer or questioning students that had specific implications for teachers of middle and high school adolescents. Again, participants were not calling for a Queer Studies course in high school or a spotlighted attention to queer perspectives in secondary schools. Nor were participants calling for a moralistic approach to including queer content in schools that would indoctrinate or condition students to think a certain way. From specific pedagogical recommendations to incorporating current events into instructive moments in the classroom, participants overall called for more open and supportive teachers and staff in middle and high schools that adequately presented a range of diverse perspectives in order to meet the needs of all students and help better prepare them for life after graduating.

Supportive Teachers and Staff

Perhaps the most important implication for educators in middle and high schools that participants brought out in this study focused on the need for safe, supportive, and encouraging
approaches to working with adolescent students. Participants continually spoke about the impact that educators had on their development during these years and recalled specific teachers that helped them navigate their secondary school experiences. They also remembered teachers who they felt had failed them along the way and spoke about continued feelings of animosity or disappointment. Participants called for teachers in middle and high schools to work towards more supportive and friendly interactions with all students in a school community. Many participants relayed that a smile goes a long way and that even encouragement on academic endeavors from teachers during this time made them feel a sense of support.

Participants specifically remembered examples of teasing and bullying from their secondary school experiences where teachers did nothing to intervene (or were perpetrators of the bullying). Additionally, participants continually spoke about the way that Other students were treated at their respective schools, such as shy students, students of color, or other queer or questioning students. They all felt that it is the teachers and adults in schools that should be modeling and demonstrating a supportive and friendly attitude to all students in a school in order to promote understanding and empathy. Additionally, participants also felt a level of distrust with their teachers and adults in their school environments because often their schools would report confidential information to their parents. This idea is particularly relevant for queer or questioning adolescents, who still must navigate the closet in their personal and public lives in order to survive these years. A conversation from the in-state focus group illustrates this point:

Saj: Even on an individual level, teachers who consider themselves allies or teachers who don’t appreciate their kids being…or any kids being abused or bullied in the hallways should, I don’t know, pull a kid aside and let them know that…

LC: I do agree with that completely.

Saj: Let them know that they’re there…you can talk to them. At least making themselves sort of an outlet.
LC: I was always afraid, even talking with certain teachers, that if I ever said too much, they would still tell my parents

Owen: Right.

In addition to modeling positive interactions with students, participants also spoke about the need for teachers in middle and high schools to explicitly think through how to create environments in which students can freely discuss and explore topics or issues of relevance in a safe and confidential manner. Jeffrey touched on this idea in his letter to his former school system, as he wrote, “In terms of creating a more welcoming environment, take the initiative and create a safe space policy among faculty and students, allowing for open, unbiased, and nonjudgmental discussion of sexual/gender identity and any associated questions therein.”

**Pedagogical Considerations**

Participants also gave a few specific pedagogical recommendations for educators in secondary schools. From using appropriate gender pronouns when describing events and students to incorporating better questioning techniques, participants continually spoke about the need for teachers to strategically think about the students they are teaching. As participants pointed out, this idea is particularly important for queer students because they might be questioning their place on the gender or sexual orientation spectrum during these years and face issues that might not be visible. A specific recommendation that participants brought out was the need for teachers to use more varied examples in their instruction in order to reach a diverse population. George spoke to this idea and offered an example for a math class that incorporates queer identities:

Use classroom examples that are more inclusive, that are not so heteronormatively gendered. Several things like using classroom examples that involve same-sex couples. Or a trans* person, you know? Even in math class you could do that. You know, **Bobby and his boyfriend went out to get ice cream. Bobby ate two thirds of the ice cream cone**
and was sharing with his boyfriend. How much does his boyfriend have left to eat?

Boom.

In a move to create cross-cultural exchanges and foster critical thinking, participants implored teachers in secondary schools to incorporate debates or argumentation techniques that allow for students to learn both sides of an issue. George called on secondary schools to not only have spaces and activities for like-minded individuals, but also to seek out ways that differing viewpoints can have a space in that school. He explained:

Have some ways for students to engage in the world in that way and kind of unite with like-minded thinkers and also to debate across the aisle a little bit and be exposed to some other ideas and recognize that, oh, there’s a group of people here who think differently from how I do.

Participants provided an example of this by stating that a high school that has a student Republican club should also have a student Democratic (or Independent) club. There are also specific pedagogical implications participants offered that would help teachers in middle and high schools not only speak to all of the students they teach (whether visible or not), but also create opportunities for students to learn from one another. George wanted secondary schools to incorporate more research-based activities in the classroom, such as jigsaw, as he explained:

There’s a classroom technique called the jigsaw classroom. A social psychologist named Elliot Aronson developed it in, I think, Arizona or somewhere where they were having some difficulties with prejudice in the classroom. And it is essentially is mutually interdependent learning groups in classes. And the kids get mixed up so they have to learn from each other and it promotes them teaching each other how to be good teachers as well as learn the material, learn how to be good teachers themselves because, you know, I’m responsible for what you teach me and you’re responsible for what I teach you. And it had profound impacts on the racial tensions in the school as well as profound impacts on the academic success of everybody. And he’s written some great books about it. I think more schools should implement that kind of thing and that would be good in all forms of diversity because you learn…it breaks down those barriers because you have to be exposed to kids who are different from you.
**Incorporating Current Events**

Another way that participants felt that teachers in middle and high schools could be better addressing queer or questioning students was through the incorporation of contemporary issues in the classroom. George, who learned about homosexuality in a negative context in his private, religious school, remembered learning about Dick Cheney’s queer daughter as a result of working on a mock presidential campaign at his high school. He felt that these real-world examples helped change his viewpoint on homosexuality during these years. With the tremendous amount of news stories, campaigns, and events that are happening around queer identities and lives, the opportunities are ripe for educators to relay these events to their students. As Calliope stated, “Why in civics classes did we not learn about any of the recent legislation. Like, I had never heard of Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) until I discovered it on my own.” Not only did students feel silenced or ignored by the lack of inclusion of recent events in their secondary school experiences, they also felt their teachers denied information to them that would have helped their understanding of self and their development.

Again, it is important to note that participants never once called on teachers in middle and high schools to present a one-sided argument on an issue, or to moralistically relay to students how to think. Rather, they all simply wanted queer identities, histories, and contemporary issues presented to them in secondary schools, so they could learn about them and make their own conclusions. Many participants spoke about the benefit that they would have received in adolescence if they had learned about the “It Gets Better” campaign. A conversation from the out-of-state focus group illustrates this point:

Calliope: I think there are more things now than there were, probably when I was in high school. Like, the whole “It Gets Better” project. I mean, that would have been incredibly helpful. But, I mean, if teachers point those things out to their students.
Loki: It doesn’t even have to be that they agree with it. *This is a thing that happened...have y’all heard about this in the news? I think it’s stupid...what do you think about it?* Something. Just talk about it. Talk it out. Teachers might learn something.

Whether through contemporary legislative victories, campaigns, or presidential politics, participants brought up many examples of queer identities and perspectives that educators could, and should, be better incorporating into their classroom conversations and activities.

**Spaces and Support Structures**

Participants felt strongly that all secondary schools should strategically incorporate spaces and support structures for all of their students in order to create more safe and nurturing academic environments. For openly queer students or students who are questioning their gender or sexual orientation, for closeted students or flamboyantly visible queer students, all participants spoke about the difficulties of navigating middle and high school as a member of a marginalized group. They all felt strongly that schools had an obligation to not only academically nurture students in their development, but they also had a responsibility to safely and supportively meet the needs of all of the students in their school and community. Participants knew the obstacles in this pursuit, particularly for private or religious secondary schools, as George explained:

> I mean, I kind of think all schools should have to have it. But, you know, I know that some schools, like my school, are going to be fundamentally opposed to that. But, I think they all should have to have spaces.

Regardless of school context, all participants discussed specific spaces and support structures that middle and high schools should be incorporating to help queer or questioning students navigate these years.

**Safe Zones**

Since coming to college, participants became aware of Safe Zone programs and all
felt that these would be welcomed and useful spaces to have in all secondary schools. The Safe Zone concept was developed in the early 1990’s on college campuses as a way to offer supportive spaces for queer or questioning students and to foster an environment of empathy and understanding across the campus. The idea is that teachers or adults at the school go through a training that educates them about queer identities and issues and offers them counseling techniques and outreach contacts in the community. Once they have completed the training, they receive a Safe Zone sticker that they can display in their classrooms or office doors to let people know that this is a confidential, safe space where anyone can come (particularly queer or questioning students) with questions, concerns, or issues that arise. All participants spoke positively about the Safe Zone program since learning about it at college and felt strongly that the model should be incorporated in middle and high schools. Megan explained some of her rationale for why Safe Zones would work well in middle schools:

I think UA’s Safe Zone is a step in the right direction. I think that middle schools especially could definitely benefit from having a program like Safe Zone-having some sign on a door. And that sign says so much. First of all, it says to the queer students: you can talk to me. And second of all, it says to the heterosexual students: I’m not going to tolerate you making someone else feel unsafe.

A conversation with Jeremy, who was the first and only person out in his rural high school at age 16, further illuminates the reasoning why participants felt Safe Zones would work well in all secondary school environments:

Jeremy: You know, even like the Safe Zone that we have here. Man, if we would have had that in high school. (laughter) Just to have someone to talk to. That would have just been really nice. I mean, it doesn’t take 500 people to do it. Just one or two. Just a couple. That’s a good place to start.

Parks: And what would that have offered you, if that had been a program or a teacher had had that sticker up?

Jeremy: Well, I would have had someone to talk to about coming out and, you know, how I feel and are these feelings normal and what do I do from here, you know? Because
I had no one. I seriously had no one to talk to. And my straight friends and family, they were supportive, but you don’t know, you know?

Parks: Supportive-not informative?

Jeremy: Exactly.

Parks: What would having that Safe Zone sticker or program offer to non-queer students, do you think, in a school, if anything?

Jeremy: I think it would let them know that that person is, you know, open-minded and fair. And they would talk to you about anything. I don’t think they would have an agenda.

Again, participants were not calling for teachers to indoctrinate students or to have an agenda regarding queer identities or topics. They simply wanted a safe and supportive space in which they could go to in school with questions or problems they were experiencing as queer or questioning adolescents. Participants were aware that incorporating Safe Zone programs into secondary schools would be difficult, due to a host of issues. Some knew that school systems would never take such steps, but still called on teachers to institute Safe Zones on their own. Calliope explained, “Even if the school isn’t willing to do it, I mean, an individual teacher can put a Safe Zone sticker on the door.” Other participants called on either secondary students themselves to initiate Safe Zone programs in their schools or school systems to support individual teachers who wanted to bring the program to their school. Jeffrey spoke to this idea, as he stated:

I think that what we have—even though it’s not ideal—but, I think that some of the programs that we have here at UA regarding Safe Zone, I think that those ideas need to be implemented in a K-12 instance. I think that if it can’t be done in a student-led capacity, then let the faculty take the initiative to create the space for the students. If the students can’t create a Safe Zone idea for themselves, then there needs to be someone designated in the faculty…either through the counseling office or even an outside liaison through the school system…to be specifically trained in cultural diversity so that students can say, Yes, I can go to school and I can wear my pride colors and I can be myself and I can hold hands with the person I’m dating and not fear being shoved into a locker or tripped over or kicked or have hateful speech slurred at them from every corner.
Training Teachers

Part of the benefit of the Safe Zone program, according to participants, was the training that preceded its implementation. Participants felt strongly that teachers and staff in secondary schools need specific training for working with queer or questioning youth. Part of the benefit would be the acquisition of language or ideas that fall under the queer spectrum. Another outcome could be more empathetic approaches from teachers based on an awareness of the diversity of all of their students. Loki explained some of the potential benefits of these trainings for teachers in secondary schools:

I think they should have Safe Zone trainings for teachers. I mean, they have them now in universities, but they’re usually optional. I think just having teachers go through something like that…you know, like sensitivity training. (laughs) Some teachers have been doing it for a long time. They’re jaded about what they want to teach students and who the students are. They’re probably sick of it. Don’t let that get in the way of teaching people. That should be your goal. Not teaching them morality. It should just be about the subject you’re teaching. So, I think if they had some kind of class or something like that, just to make it clear that some teachers are available to be there for you.

Participants continually brought up the idea that they did not want teachers indoctrinating students or moralistically teaching about queer identities or content. They also did not want teachers silencing or misinforming students about these ideas either. Rather, they simply wanted accurate and diverse perspectives reflected in curricula and instruction and through the overall spaces and support structures during middle and high school. Jeremy spoke further to the need for training teachers to do so in appropriate and supportive means:

As far as teachers and all go, they need to be trained first. You know, they can’t just walk in and just give their ideas. They have to know what they’re talking about before they spread their message. So, it all starts with the teachers, definitely. I recommend more LGBTQ exposure for teachers so they are better prepared and present the material in a knowledgeable way.

As participants navigated their way through middle and high school and eventually taught
themselves about queer identities and issues, they felt strongly that it should have been teachers in school who taught them about these topics. Many spoke about the effects the silencing of queer content in secondary schools had on their development and their understanding of self during these years. Participants felt that all students in secondary schools would benefit from teachers and staff receiving adequate training on the diversity of queer identities. Megan synthesized this idea and spoke about the consequences of educators not understanding the scope of queer perspectives, as she stated:

Honestly, I wish that Safe Zone trainings were mandatory for all teachers. I can’t imagine the number of teachers in my middle school that had no fucking idea what a two-spirit was or no fucking idea what a transgender was. Or thought that transgender and cross-dressing were the same things. Or thought that asexuals could never experience sexual attraction ever. You know, I just really wish that there would have been more mandatory information for instructors to know about possible problems that they’re going to have to address with students that they have. But yeah, if they have to go through all these courses and learn about children with disabilities or children with problems at home or underprivileged children or…and not to say that being queer is a handicap, but that it’s something that they should have to know about. Because misinformation and non-information is extremely, extremely hurtful. And then sometimes even fatal to queer students.

**Bullying Interventions**

Almost every participant recalled examples of teasing or bullying of students from their middle and high school experiences. Many of these stories involved queer or questioning students as the target or victims of the bullying and fellow students or teachers as the perpetrators. Participants felt strongly that teachers and adults in secondary schools should not be bystanders or perpetrators of teasing or bullying, but rather should consistently intervene in an appropriate manner. A conversation from the in-state focus group illustrates this point:

Saj: And also just stand up for things that you hear in your classrooms. Like, if you hear somebody going off on a kid and calling them all these words, you know, tell them to cut it out! Get onto them about it. Send them to the office or something. Don’t just let it happen.
LC: Yeah-teachers definitely need to step it up.

Owen: A lot of teachers at my school often participated in some of the stuff. Participants felt that mandating teachers and staff to intervene in instances of teasing or bullying would result in all students in a school feeling safer and more supported. This is particularly true for queer or questioning students (or any member of a marginalized group).

Participants also discussed the teachable moments that instances of teasing, ridicule, or bullying could create in middle and high schools. Not only did participants feel that teachers should speak up and directly deal with cases of bullying, but they should also engage students in conversations about the languaging and consequences of what was being said. Loki provided an example of this, as she stated:

I’ve seen trying to take out the use of That’s so gay, or whatever, as a political thing, and it’s not. I mean, we don’t go around saying You’re so retarded. Telling people not to say retarded is the exact same thing as telling people not to say they’re gay. It’s who someone is, and you’re taking someone’s identity and existence and turning it into a negative, derogatory thing. So, telling your students not to say that or getting them in trouble for saying it is not taking a political stance on gay marriage. It’s just not taking a group of people and using them as a poor example of something. Or equating it with being unusually unintelligent, like most politicians are. Just even asking a student, Why did you say that? What prompted you to use that particular word at that particular time? Why do you dislike this person so much that you would use that particular word to describe them? Just ask them why. And a lot of times, they don’t know. Kids just say things. But, if you try to turn it into something that can help them understand it, maybe they can…instead of just shouting at them and saying, Don’t say that! Why not just teach them something about it? I mean, they’re in school for a reason. They should be learning about the world.

Loki’s statements and the sentiments of the other participants in this study show the critical need for teachers and schools to be thinking through how to address queer identities in their programming in ways that help them (and all students) understand these issues more accurately.
**Gender-neutral Spaces**

Another space in school that some participants spoke about were places where queer or questioning students feel most vulnerable, such as bathrooms and locker rooms for physical education classes. With the growing understanding of trans* identities and the proliferation of bullying and violence that queer or questioning adolescence face, participants discussed ways that schools should think more strategically about how to make their environments safer and more accommodating to students. George personally reflected on his experiences negotiating these spaces in middle and high school and offered his recommendations on this topic:

At the very least have gender-neutral bathroom options, or single-stall bathrooms in schools. You know, bathrooms are scary for all queer kids. Especially for the trans* students. But, for all queer kids because they’re a place that is outside of teacher’s eyes a lot of times. And I can speak to the experience, at least, for a gay male student going into a boy’s bathroom can be a scary place. Even if you don’t know why. Locker rooms are scary. Have some sort of alternative locker room solution. Or have them supervise so that it’s made clear that safety is the top priority.

While we can begin to see schools taking the initial steps to include gender-neutral spaces, participants spoke to the critical need for safety measures to be in place in middle and high schools in order for queer or questioning youth to feel secure and supported.

**Access to Positive Models**

From curricular integration to calls for diverse teaching staffs, participants stressed the importance of seeing a spectrum of positive representations of queer identities for queer or questioning adolescents (and their straight peers). Loki discussed the need for queer or questioning youth to see these positive representations in order to understand the possibilities that exist in their lives and to know that there are others out there like them:

It’s necessary to allow students of all identities to know that they exist—that there are others like them. Be open with who writers were. Talk about Tennessee Williams’ life like it wasn’t a horror just because he liked men. Provide your students with literature, memoirs—positive examples of who they could be.
It is important to contextualize that participants were explicitly calling for exposure to diverse representations of queer identities at school, not stereotypical models. Nor were they solely calling for the inclusion of gay White males, who oftentimes dominate people’s perception of queer identities. Participants wanted to see and learn about a spectrum of queer identities during their secondary school experiences. In addition to curricular integration, participants also wanted to see support for diverse, queer teachers in secondary schools. When asked about the potential benefit of having access to queer teachers in secondary schools, George felt strongly that schools should be seeking out and supporting diverse, queer teachers, as he explained:

And being conscientious of intersectionality in those as well. Like, having queer women and queer people of color. Cause, you know, I mean it’s still a problem if you’re hiring queer faculty, but the only people you’re hiring is gay White men. But, I guess it’s better than having no gay people there at all, but it’s still a problem if it’s limiting the diversity.

Services

In addition to the call for spaces and supportive structures for queer or questioning students in secondary schools, participants also discussed specific services that should be incorporated in the overall programming in secondary schools for the betterment of all students. From gay/straight alliances (GSAs) to the inclusion of trained and supportive counseling services and health services that operate in confidentiality, participants drew from their own everyday lived experiences to make recommendations for specific services that should be integrated into secondary school programming in order to meet the needs of all of students.

Gay/Straight Alliances

None of the participants reported having a space or a group in their middle or high school environments explicitly for queer or questioning students. With the proliferation of GSAs since the early 1970’s, participants felt strongly that all secondary schools should have some type of
space or program explicitly for queer or questioning students and allies. As Megan stated, “I wish there had been a [GSA] at middle school. Or a [GSA] at high school. Or just a place where I felt safe.” Some participants contextualized that while including a GSA in some school environments would be challenging, the presence of this service or group would offer much-needed support to students. Jeremy reflected on this idea from his own experiences in his rural community and recognized that this might be difficult in conservative or rural environments. However, participants also pointed out that in order for GSAs to really function and remain viable in secondary schools, there needed to be administrative or faculty support. George spoke to this point, as he stated, “I think they should have a high school [GSA] equivalent in every school. Even if it’s just one or two kids in it, there should be something there. And there should be a faculty advisor.”

**School Counselors and Psychologists**

Participants discussed the important role that school counselors and psychologists could play in secondary schools. George spoke to the support that school counselors and psychologists could offer queer or questioning students (and their families) during adolescence:

> If psychologists could get into schools, that would be a great place to do those things in. They would be perfectly poised to do them. And, you know, work with parents on those types of things as well. So important.

However, none of the participants reported having access to knowledgeable, supportive, and confidential counselors during their middle or high school years. Many spoke of their school counselors as “a joke” or had specific examples of confidentiality being broken and specific repercussions they experienced as a result of going to a teacher or counselor with a problem during these years. Megan’s example illustrates this point:

> I had a problem when I very first started to deal with depression in middle school. And I went to a teacher who I felt like I trusted and was very perturbed by them. They went
straight to my parents...told them everything and things that I didn’t say. And they made egregious errors in assuming what I was trying to say to them. And it was embarrassing. And I felt like it was a sort of betrayal. Because I came to them, you know, because I couldn’t talk to my parents. And then they just went to my parents and lied about what I said. So, I feel like having someone who was designated to not betraying that trust and there are clear guidelines of... unless I think you’re going to hurt yourself, whatever you say to me-no one else is going to hear it. I feel like that’s a really underestimated area of importance for middle school and high school kids to be able to talk about stuff to someone who they feel won’t judge them or just get them in trouble.

Megan went on to describe how a confidential, supportive, and knowledgeable school counselor would have offered her a tremendous service during these years, as she was struggling through depression and negotiating her sexuality:

A counselor’s office would be a good one. I know that a lot of times-especially when I was a kid-the counselor’s office was a huge joke. They’re paid to sit there and listen to people whine every now and again, but they don’t really know anything. And I don’t want to talk to them. If I tell them, they’re going to tell my parents. I remember going through middle and high school and just thinking my counselor was just so stupid and why is that even a job. I wish that someone would have told me, Hey-the counselor is here for a reason. And if you need it, your information is confidential. The only time I’ll ever tell anyone is if I’m afraid you’re going to hurt yourself. You know, a, b, and c. If I would have been informed on that resource at all…and also for that resource to have even just the cheesy pamphlet in the office would have made me feel better. Cause, I mean, I may or may not have picked up that cheesy pamphlet, but just seeing that in a space where it is okay to talk about how I feel, would have been a very sly, supplemental way to tell me that I’m okay.

This idea of finding a confidential and supportive space in middle and high school where students could go and feel that they are okay is crucial for queer or questioning youth who must negotiate heteronormative and homophobic environments.

Participants also knew that in order for school counselors and psychologists to be fully equipped to address the needs of all of their students (particularly queer or questioning students), they needed specific training. As Jeremy called for, “And maybe have it to where in order to be a counselor, you have to go through certain types of LGBTQ training, so to speak.” George elaborated on the importance of training school counselors and psychologists in general and the
critical need for queer or questioning adolescents to have access to these services in middle and high school:

Different schools do counseling different ways. Some of them don’t even have somebody that’s psychologically trained. Some counselors just help people get into college. I think, you know, anybody who’s going into counseling in school, whether they’re coming from a clinical perspective or whether it’s just from a school psychology perspective, they need to have some good clinical foundations. I think it’s important for them to have exposure to diverse people that they’re working with beforehand and then to learn those things. To have cultural competency type coursework before they go into schools to understand the potential struggles that a queer student might face in a school, with their family. You know, you may have a student who is going to get disowned by their family. I think for them, it’s really important because they’re in the crosshairs of the time period when kids are just developing that piece of their identity. And in that developmental stage, it’s so important to sort of understand the developmental process of gender, the developmental process of your sexual orientation. I think it’d be great if all schools had an actual psychologist/therapist there handy cause there are so many opportunities for them to do school-based interventions.

While the inclusion and implementation of counseling services in secondary schools vary by geography and school jurisdiction, the participants in this study all pointed to ways that queer or questioning students could be better supported through these outlets in schools.

**Health Issues**

Participants also brought up the importance of having adequately trained school nurses or health professionals available in secondary schools. In addition to the incorporation of factual sex education that addresses health concerns for queer and straight bodies, participants felt strongly that schools should be a place where students can have access to health care or consultations in a confidential manner. Megan elaborated on this recommendation, as she stated:

A school nurse or a health professional of some sort…a pediatrician or someone who deals with adolescents or someone who deals with developing bodies. For them to have a sort of run-down on…you probably shouldn’t say this cause that will come off as mean. Or you could say this and that would feel supportive without crossing any boundaries. And that falls in line again with, if the school nurse has had all this training and is required to tell students the truth about queer sex, then that’s just one more place where students aren’t going to be lied to. It’s automatically confidential.
Participants knew that not all secondary schools have nurses and some suggested having a school/community partnership with local health providers that would offer students confidential access to information or treatment, as Jeremy discussed:

The health department could definitely come to schools and have conversations with the students. And again, they need to be educated too. Cause they never did that when I was in high school. But that way, you’ve got your basics I guess you would say. You know, you’ve got someone to talk to, you kind of know about sex and people to relate to. Those years are so critical.

It is important to note that while participants were directly calling for access to health care and consultations in secondary schools for all students, they were also explicitly urging adequate training of these professionals. Similar to the training of teachers and counselors, participants felt strongly that in order to fully address the needs and identities of queer or questioning students, health professionals who work with adolescents in schools and in general should have an understanding of the diversity of queer health issues.

Policy

Finally, participants discussed specific national, state, and/or local policy recommendations they believed should be implemented in middle and high schools to more adequately meet the needs of queer or questioning students (and faculty). Jeremy spoke to the obstacles ahead for drafting and implementing inclusive policies in secondary schools that adequately and appropriately support queer or questioning students:

I think a lot of things, it’s going to have to come down to legal battles and Supreme Court rulings. Which is sad, but I think that’s what it’s going to take here, you know, to get things like that to happen. There’s a lot of red tape and politics in school systems.

Whether considering the support of queer teachers and staff or rethinking schools’ guidelines for discrimination, harassment, and Internet access, participants all felt strongly that one of the best ways to make life better for queer people in secondary schools was through policy changes.
Support for Teachers and Staff

None of the participants recalled a teacher or adult from their secondary school experiences who openly identified as queer. Although there were rumors of some teachers, participants knew that their school environments prohibited most teachers from even considering being out. Participants also understood that many states (including the state where this research was conducted) do not have policies that protect teachers’ job security based on gender or sexual orientation. All participants adamantly felt that gender and sexual orientation should be protected classes in policies that affect the hiring and firing of teachers in public schools.

George spoke to this idea, as he stated:

I think that all schools should start promoting sexual orientation diversity in their faculty …and not stop promoting and focusing on other forms of diversity in their faculty. But, it’s important for students to not just see at a distance, but to see close to home people. And they need to have teachers that they can look at and be able to relate to. So, you know, LGBTQ identified faculty. Trans* identified faculty. Just anything on that spectrum. Give them complete protection in their jobs.

In addition to the support an inclusive policy would offer teachers in terms of being out and maintaining job security, participants continually spoke to the importance that seeing and learning from diverse queer teachers would have offered them (and other queer or questioning secondary students).

In addition to calls for inclusive policies that protect teachers’ jobs based on gender and sexual orientation, participants also spoke about overall policies that would allow teachers to take initiative on their own pertaining to queer issues without fear of repercussion. When discussing the idea of implementing a GSA, Jeffrey stated:

If the kids aren’t allowed to create such a space, then it falls on the faculty. And the faculty has to be able to stand on its own feet and say, We’re going to take the initiative to do this because our students deserve it.
Participants also spoke about the need for specific policies in areas that are hesitant to enact fully-inclusive policies that specifically protect and support queer or questioning students and faculty. Many participants spoke about the influence of churches on their schools and directly discussed the need for inclusive policies in these areas. When asked about the benefit that inclusive policies for queer teachers and students would offer a school community, LC reflected on her own experiences in a small, rural community and responded:

I think that might be easier for teachers being afraid of either being fired or pissing the wrong person off. Like, there’s a Southern Baptist church on every street corner. And the city council was also the pastor or the pastor’s wife or the car dealership owner or the mayor. It’s just small town.

This idea of school and community being intrinsically linked (and often mediated through local churches) came up with many of the participants in this study.

**Inclusive Discrimination and Harassment Policies**

In addition to the specific recommendations participants offered teachers in terms of addressing bullying and harassment of queer or questioning students, they also suggested that middle and high schools should incorporate policies that further reinforce the protection of students. Participants felt that harassment, bullying, and discrimination policies for secondary schools should include specific provisions for gender and sexual orientation. They felt that these inclusive policies would not only offer faculty and students a degree of protection and support to openly live out their lives at school, but could also foster a more empathetic and understanding school culture. George spoke to this idea, as he called for inclusive policies that instilled a sense of compassion in a school community:

Teach kids how to be better human beings or citizens. Like, how do you solicit better social support from your environment and the people around you? And how do you respond when somebody is asking you for support? And things like conflict mediation and no tolerance anti-bullying policies, no tolerance anti-violence policies in school. Teaching kids how to be assertive without being aggressive. And, you know, basically,
like helping kids a priori, regardless if you know who’s in the classroom, but a priori, like teaching kids how to empathize with each other better and how to just relate to each other and be better citizens and stewards of this community and the people around them. I mean, that type of stuff, I would start those things in elementary school.

Again, it is important to note that participants understood that inclusive policies protecting queer or questioning students and faculty would not only make these individuals feel safer and more supported in schools, but they would also extend to all members of a school community.

Participants knew that policies for harassment, discrimination, and bullying in secondary schools should not only include sexual orientation, but also gender expression. A conversation from the out-of-state focus group illustrates this idea:

Calliope: But, I mean, why not include homosexuality in the list of things that you can’t harass someone for?

Loki: Exactly. Including that, like, three words in the terms of a school can make a difference.

Calliope: Yeah-just have it as a policy. Because, just not mentioning it…I mean, I’m sure if somebody had punched me in the face because I said I’m a lesbian, I’m sure my school would have done something about it, right? But, just by not including homosexuality and gender identity in the policy-it’s just more silence about it.

Loki: Especially gender identity. Because often they include…I think Alabama has LGBT things, but not…like, sexuality but not gender identity. And those are the people that feel the most vulnerable anyway. So, you should include that. What does it hurt to include that? Does it make you look bad? I don’t understand how being more open to people makes a school look bad. Unless they’re Catholic, I guess. Just kidding. (laughs)

Again, Loki directly received negative representations of queer identities from her private, Catholic secondary school while queer topics were silenced in Calliope’s experiences in her large, public high school. Regardless of participants’ secondary school backgrounds, they felt that all middle and high schools should be implementing policies that deliberately protect a spectrum of queer or questioning students and faculty in order to foster an environment of tolerance, understanding, and empathy.
**Internet Access**

None of the participants remembered having Internet access to queer content or topics via school computers during middle and high school, with the exception of Saj who was able to circumvent restrictions on his school’s web browsers. They all reported filters and blocks that regulated their schools’ search engines to prohibit students from accessing anything queer during these years. Due to these filters and blocks, participants could not access queer historical figures or events, health issues, or any site with queer content on school computers. All participants felt strongly that if schools have computers with Internet access, the filters should not include general information on queer topics. Participants stated they did not need or recommend access to social media platforms or explicit materials pertaining to queer identities in middle and high school environments. However, the fact that they could not access health issues or historical facts about queer people made participants feel resentment and a denial of information due to the policies of their schools and local school agencies. Jeremy, who graduated high school in 1998, continually spoke of the fact that he came out before the prevalence of the Internet and was jealous of younger queer people who had this outlet during adolescence. As Saj put it, “The Internet was honestly my biggest ally during that time.” In an age where we all benefit from readily available information via the Internet, participants felt that schools needed to rethink and reassess Internet policies in middle and high schools to open up more outlets for students to learn about the world around them.

**Cross Analysis**

Although participants self-identified differently, had diverse backgrounds in their secondary schooling, and possessed unique everyday lived experiences in relation to the overarching phenomenon, they all discussed the erasure and/or negative representations of queer
identities and content they received in their middle and high schools. No participant reported learning anything positive about queer people, historical/literary contributions, or contemporary issues in secondary school. Geographical location of participants’ middle and high school experiences did not result in contradictory findings among participants (either for in-state versus out-of-state participants or rural versus urban school environments). For those participants who matriculated secondary schools in the state of Alabama, no one reported ever hearing a teacher relay to students that homosexuality is illegal, which state policy mandates.

The diverse identity categories that participants self-defined also did not result in contradictory findings in this study. The participants in this study were between the ages of 19 to 33, representing Black, White, and Asian ethnicities/races, and identified as female, male, transgender, queer, questioning, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, genderqueer, post-label, and panromantic asexual. Although the diversity of participants clearly illustrates the beautifully evolving spectrum of queer identities, the stories and perspectives each brought to the study possessed similar ideas and themes in relation to the phenomenon being investigated. They all discussed the difficulties of growing up queer or questioning in a heteronormative, oppressive, and often homophobic society. These feelings were experienced by all participants in their respective school environments and for many in their home communities.

Some differences existed among participants regarding their experiences and understandings of queer content and identities during adolescence, particularly among participants who were out during these years and those who did not come out of the closet until well into college. Those participants who were out during high school faced an arguably more difficult time negotiating the formal and informal rules of their schools in order to not draw unwanted attention to themselves, face repercussions, or generally experience persecution.
However, participants who were either questioning their gender or sexual orientation during these years or did not come into their understanding of their sexual identity until well after high school still spoke about the difficulties of navigating adolescence and the oppression they experienced.

Other differences that emerged in the data revolved around the type of school environment in which participants attended. In general, those participants who attended public middle and high schools had similar experiences in terms of academic engagement and support structures for queer or questioning students. Even Megan, who attended a public, performing arts secondary school where the environment and ideology might be perceived as more flexible or open, experienced the erasure of positive queer representations and spaces from her teachers and administrators. The major difference among participants that emerged in this study can be found in the two participants who attended private, religious secondary schools. Loki and George both experienced direct instruction on queer identities and content, but from a negative standpoint. Both participants felt that their schools had particular governing ideologies that they attempted to impart to their students, which included presenting homosexuality as immoral, sinful, evil, dangerous, and/or “like eating dirt.” Perhaps this framing of queer identities can be expected from private, religious institutions. However, Loki and George continually spoke of the damaging effects their experiences and interactions in middle and high school played on their development and understanding of self.

Because all participants matriculated secondary schools in the U.S. South, they had specific thoughts on the complicated nature of growing up queer in a traditionally conservative Christian landscape in which the people, schools, and communities are intrinsically intertwined. Many participants spoke about feeling an importance of place and a sense of belonging from
their experiences growing up in the U.S. South. Because they knew they were Othered during adolescence due to the feelings they were experiencing regarding gender and sexuality, this idea of feeling a part of a community became even more complicated and alienating. A conversation from the in-state focus group illustrates this point:

Owen: There needs to be knowledge that you can still be queer, still keep your religion—that’s a big part in the South.

LC: I think that’s a key one.

Owen: Right.

LC: That’s the biggest thing with anyone I’ve met. It’s not so much that they were upset about the lifestyle change. It’s more like, they didn’t want to go to hell. They didn’t want the church to not let them back in. They didn’t want to not sing in the choir on Sundays.

Saj: Cause that’s where they built their community.

Schools and institutions in the U.S. South must think through how they address the identities and needs of all members of a community in order to more realistically and compassionately move forward as a society.

This idea has particular implications for institutions, such as schools, which use public funds to teach the children in communities across the country. However, participants also spoke about the need for private, religious institutions to be more accepting and open in their approach to working in communities. While private institutions in our society can operate and implement ideologies according to how they see fit, the everyday lived experiences and perspectives of students who matriculated private schools (such as Loki and George) have direct implications on the effectiveness and success of these schools. It matters how students attending private, religious institutions (and all schools) understand the academic education and support structures that are available to them during these years. For George, whose experiences in his private,
religious secondary school were extremely complicated, the understandings and development he has engaged in since graduating high school led him to critically call on religious schools to rethink not only what they teach, but also how they view and treat students on a daily basis:

I want to be respectful of the perspective of the people who are still religious or spiritual. I am not. And I know many wonderful people who are. And there are many wonderful people who are not or who are as well…there’s good and bad people on both sides of the aisle. I think if you want to have a religious institution—I wouldn’t send my kids there, but if you want to have a religious school, at least recognize there are diverse perspectives even within your own religion. And teach about other religions in a way that doesn’t vilify them. And I think, you know, it’s not just about…it’s important to explicitly include and implicitly include queer content, but it’s also important to implicitly and explicitly include content that’s diverse in other ways as well for the same reason I was kind of mentioning earlier. Open your mind in all horizons and it’ll help you be more flexible in your thinking. I mean, have like a diversity center in schools, you know, for sexual/gender diversity.

Regardless of secondary school background (religious, private, or public), participants in this study all spoke to the need for schools to be places where diversity is valued in the pursuit of creating a more empathetic and understanding citizenry.

Summary

This chapter presented findings from the qualitative, phenomenological research study that sought to examine the experiences and perceptions queer college students had regarding accessing queer content in their secondary school experiences. The essence of the phenomenon being examined was offered through both the textural and structural descriptions of each participant and the themes that emerged across all participants. Recommendations for ways that schools and educators can better meet the needs and identities of queer and questioning students were also explored in this chapter. Chapter V will revisit the guiding research questions, discuss the limitations of this study, examine the findings in relation to the literature review, outline implications of this study on research, practice, and policy, and offer final conclusions.
CHAPTER V:
IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Research Findings

This research study aimed to answer the following guiding questions:

1) How do queer college students feel that questions of sexual orientation and gender expression were addressed in their secondary school curricula?

2) Where did queer college students receive instruction and/or access queer content/contributions during their secondary school years?

3) How do participants understand their lives in relation to queer content and contributions that were available to them in their secondary school experiences?

4) What recommendations do queer college students have for secondary schools and curricular choices that might benefit queer or questioning students during their middle and high school years?

Overall, participants discussed the ways in which queer content, contributions, and identities were silenced or ignored in their middle and high school experiences. Those who did directly learn about gender or sexual orientation in school, such as the two participants who attended private, religious secondary schools, were taught that the idea of homosexuality (and anything that differed from the norm being promoted in their schools) equated to detrimental or sinful behaviors.

The silencing and erasure of queer identities in their secondary school experiences led participants to continually bring up the idea that they felt they did not have or were denied a
history. Because participants were deprived of information about queer identities, health issues, and historical and literary contributions in their middle and high school experiences, they all discussed the ways in which they learned about queer identities and topics on their own during these years. Not surprisingly, the Internet was the primary outlet for accessing queer content for most participants during adolescence, albeit not in their respective school environments. Many also discussed learning about queer identities, health issues, and historical contributions during these years through books, television, radio, and friends.

The ways that participants understood their lives in relation to the queer content and contributions that were available to them in their secondary school experiences varied according to the unique everyday lived experiences and support structures each participant possessed. For those participants who were out during middle or high school, they discussed navigating disclosure to others and seeking out safe, trustworthy spaces and individuals they could confide in during these years. Participants who were not out or were questioning their place in the queer spectrum during adolescence spoke about staying in the closet to survive. Many participants felt that the idea of being queer was not even a possibility they could wrap their heads around during middle or high school. Participants understood the negative implications in their schools and communities of being (or suspected of being) queer. All participants discussed the formal and informal rules of their secondary school communities that they had to negotiate in order to stay safe and make it out of high school. They also understood that in order to navigate middle and high school, they had to find survival strategies such as lying, trying to cope with pain and depression, and waiting to graduate and leave their hometowns as soon as possible. All participants discussed the spaces and support structures that helped them make it out of middle and high school.
Finally, participants offered valuable recommendations for secondary schools and curricular choices that would benefit queer or questioning students during their middle and high school years. Specific areas of improvement for secondary schools that participants spoke to include: curriculum, instruction, spaces and support structures, services, and policy. Whether through support for queer teachers or calls for gender-neutral spaces in middle and high schools, the recommendations that participants offered in this study would directly make secondary schools safer, more inviting, and more conducive learning environments for queer or questioning students. Additionally, participants continually viewed these issues from an intersectionality standpoint and discussed the ways that these recommendations would not only help queer or questioning youth, but also every student in a school community.

Limitations to the Study

Although nine diverse participants took part in this research study offering sufficient data for a phenomenological research study, it is important to note that these perspectives are not representative of the experiences of all queer youth. The single setting of this study limited this research to only encapsulate out college students at The University of Alabama who responded to the call for participants in this study. It would be worthwhile to seek out the perspectives of queer college students in other college or university settings across the U.S. (and internationally) on their experiences accessing information and spaces for queer youth during their secondary school years. Future research studies investigating these phenomena would also benefit from looking to participants in community colleges, technical schools, the military, and/or institutions beyond a traditional four-year university setting. Additionally, due to convenience, this research project only selected college students to participate in the study. This approach does not take
into consideration the countless number of queer youth who do not attend college (or even those who did not graduate high school) and follow differing paths into adulthood.

Another limitation in this study revolves around the selection of participants. In a move to learn directly from queer participants and create a space for their perspectives and knowledge on the phenomenon to guide the study, I strategically wanted to select out college students. Although the majority of the participants in this study were not out during middle and high school, they could all speak to the visibility of queer peers, information, spaces, and teachers from their secondary school years. I do not judge anyone who chooses not to disclose their sexual orientation or gender preferences for any reason, or those who are questioning their identities in any way. Nor do I judge teachers who remain closeted in order to ensure job security or students who stay in the closet until it is safe to come out. Visibility is important and therefore it is a worthwhile endeavor to learn directly from queer participants in a research study seeking to understand access and interactions with queer identities, content, and spaces during adolescence. But, part of what is lost by only looking to out participants in a research study is the immeasurable number of people who are not out of the closet, for whatever reason. It would be interesting to seek out participants who are not out of the closet or are questioning their gender or sexual orientation to see if differences exist regarding their exposure to queer content and support structures during adolescence and whether that played a role in their development or understanding of self.

The selection of participants for a research study seeking to understand how secondary schools play a role in supporting or erasing queer identities and spaces would also benefit from expanding the pool to more diverse populations. Although the participants in this research study were diverse in terms of gender, sexual orientation, age, race, geography, and secondary school
backgrounds, it would be worthwhile to seek out more diverse queer populations to better learn how this phenomenon affects people of differing backgrounds. Future studies could include more racially and sexually diverse participants, as well as look to older queer populations, to learn from their everyday lived experiences in middle and high school and how that influenced their understanding of self or development. Additionally, learning directly from queer or questioning youth embedded in secondary schools would be a valuable approach to understand how these issues play out on a daily basis in middle and high schools across the U.S. (and internationally).

Finally, this study did not incorporate any observational methods in the research design to understand directly how participants learned about queer content and support structures available to them in their middle and high school environments. It would be beneficial to conduct research studies in secondary schools to learn the levels of engagement for queer topics and how queer or questioning adolescents are receiving these messages. This call comes with risk, due to the actual or perceived dangers many youth face when disclosing their gender or sexual orientation to others. However, in order to more fully explore how this phenomenon plays out across secondary school environments, future research studies should strategically and carefully seek out these spaces to learn how the following populations are receiving or understanding how and where queer identities are presented: queer or questioning youth, straight and/or cisgender peers, teachers, administrators, and staff. By conducting qualitative research studies around queer topics inside and outside of school environments, we can begin to better recognize how these issues influence all youth and potentially help evolve our understanding in the ongoing development of creating equitable, supportive school environments for all students.
Implications

Findings from this qualitative phenomenological study have implications in the following areas: educational institutions and practice, research, policymaking, and my own practice. Each of these areas has specific recommendations including: school systems, teachers, and staff of secondary schools, teacher education programs, qualitative and educational research, and local, state, and federal policies. These implications and recommendations are described in the following sections.

Implications for Educational Institutions and Practice

This research study was formulated to directly learn from queer participants about their everyday lived experiences in secondary schools. Part of the impetus in this work revolved around understanding the level of academic engagement and support services that were available to them in their middle and high school environments as a way to explore their development and understanding of self as a result of these experiences. Perhaps the most critical element of this study focused on the recommendations that participants offered secondary schools, educators, administrators, staff, and teacher education programs for better addressing the identities, perspectives, and needs of queer or questioning adolescents attending middle and high schools. A discussion of specific recommendations this study offers educational institutions and practices is presented below.

Recommendations for School Systems and Secondary Schools

Secondary schools themselves and the school systems that regulate, support, and govern these institutions have specific roles to play in the academic and social development of the students that are enrolled in middle and high schools in their communities. A recommendation that all participants in this study spoke to revolved around the idea that whether visible or not,
queer or questioning students exist and the adults in charge of these institutional spaces should conscientiously think through how to support these students directly as well as create supportive environments in which these students can feel safe and thrive. Participants continually spoke to the formal and informal rules of their middle and high schools, which they felt not only stifled, or at least complicated, their understanding of self during adolescence but also limited the possibilities of who they could be in the world. They discussed not having a history or a sense of place as a queer or questioning youth as a result of their experiences in secondary school and not seeing any positive representations on the queer spectrum either in curricula or in their schools’ teachers and staff.

Local education agencies (LEAs) have a level of autonomy over the overall functioning, policies, and programming in their schools. The findings of this study, in line with ongoing quantitative and qualitative research agendas exploring the everyday lived experiences of queer or questioning youth navigating adolescence and the evolving visibility of queer identities in every facet of U.S. society, should urge LEAs to recognize this momentum as a tremendous opportunity (and responsibility) to step up to the plate and begin incorporating supportive academic and social environments for all of their students. LEAs should look to and learn from the research and progress of Queer Rights Movements over the past few decades and begin opening up their understanding, procedures, approaches, and policies regarding the inclusion of queer identities, perspectives, and needs in every aspect of their educational programming. From curriculum to services, from policies to support structures, LEAs and secondary schools must strategically think through how the erasure, marginalization, and damaging approaches that are currently being employed pertaining to queer content and contributions in middle and high
schools are harming not only queer or questioning students, but all students in a school community (as described by participants in this study).

Participants also reinforced the idea throughout this study that secondary schools present limitless potential in helping rectify the detrimental effects of persecuting, erasing, and stigmatizing queer identities in our society. Participants called for schools to be places where future generations can all feel supported and gain a better understanding of the experiences of Others by recommending that secondary schools incorporate the following: (1) accurate historical information on the contributions of queer people throughout history, (2) better informed and more compassionate teachers, and (3) more safe spaces and services for queer or questioning adolescents. LEAs in all secondary schools should support and implement the recommendations that participants offered regarding arts education (including supporting band, chorus, and visual arts departments), health education and access (including accurate and comprehensive sex education, school nurses, partnerships with local health professionals), and the development of teachers, staff, counselors, and psychologists who are supportive and knowledgeable about the unique needs and perspectives of queer or questioning youth.

Ultimately, by creating policies, spaces, and services to educate students about queer historical figures, events, and contemporary issues, the effects on schools and future generations would potentially evoke a framework toward “disruptive knowledge” (Kumashiro, 2002) that is crucial to rectify the information that is currently being perpetuated (or erased) about the lives, bodies, and complex identities of queer people in secondary schools. According to Kumashiro (2002), “disruptive knowledge” is essential in the evolving movement toward “antioppressive education” in our society.
**Recommendations for Teachers and Staff in Secondary Schools**

The erasure and/or negative representations of queer identities participants that described experiencing in their middle and high school environments should be a call to secondary teachers and staff to think about the consequences of their actions (or lack thereof) in the lives of their students. Although almost every single participant spoke about supportive teachers they had access to during these years, many participants also described feelings of depression, resentment, distrust, anger, and suicide as a result of their experiences during adolescence navigating middle and high school. Teachers and staff embedded in secondary schools should better address the diversity of the student populations they work with (whether visible or not) in curricula, instruction, interactions with students, and support structures and services. At the very least, teachers should not eat dirt as a teaching tool to demonstrate to students their own personal, flawed, damaging beliefs on homosexuality in a class on social justice (or in any class).

In terms of curricula, the findings of this study correlate with previous research on multicultural education that argues that homosexuality is often the most controversial category included in school curricula (Smith, 1999; Biegel, 2010). This study was also able to more qualitatively explore the representations of queer identities that participants were presented with in their middle and high school experiences. The latest Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey (NSCS) investigating the experiences of queer or questioning secondary students found that only 16.8% of participants (n=8,584) were taught positive representations about LGBT people, history, or events in their schools (Kosciw, et al, 2012, p. 18). While the GLSEN study was a quantitative approach to this work, the participants in this study were able to speak to the representations of queer identities they experienced in middle and high school in a more in-depth and exploratory space. It is an
important finding of the study that no participant reported learning directly in school about positive representations of queer identities. Research shows that the inclusion of multicultural voices and perspectives in school curricula helps not only those belonging to a particular group, but extends benefits to every student engaged in that curriculum (Colleary, 1999; Lipkin, 2004). Teachers and staff of secondary school students are offered direct recommendations through this study that they should incorporate in curricula. Participants called for the inclusion of positive queer representations in middle and high schools in the following curricular areas: accurate historical contributions, literary writings with biographical information, arts education, sex education, and social science classes.

Participants in this study also offered teachers and staff recommendations for ways that they can be making secondary school experiences safer and more supportive for all students. Overall, participants expressed their desire during these years to have helpful, encouraging, and compassionate teachers to help them navigate their middle and high school experiences. Whether treating all students with dignity and respect or intervening appropriately in instances of teasing or bullying, participants continually reinforced the idea that feeling that level of support from their teachers and school staff would have gone a long way in helping them during this time. Participants also proposed recommendations for instruction that have direct implications on teachers of secondary school students. These instructional recommendations include incorporating more current events into classroom conversations, using appropriate gender pronouns when describing events and students, strategically incorporating examples in the classroom that focus on queer identities, and diversifying pedagogical strategies employed in order to help students cross boundaries and learn from Others’ experiences and perspectives.
Finally, participants discussed their experiences accessing queer content in their middle and high schools and overall reported that their secondary school environments did not have materials, spaces, or services that deliberately addressed the perspectives of queer identities. The latest GLSEN NSCS study found that 44.1% of students reported that they could find information about LGBT-related issues in their school library and only 42.1% reported being able to access queer-related information online via school computers. (Kosciw, et al, 2012, p. 18). This phenomenological study allowed participants a space to discuss these issues and the results yielded a more complex understanding of access to queer content in secondary schools. Although the nine participants in this study are certainly not representative of the experiences of all queer or questioning students attending secondary schools across the U.S., the fact that none of them felt they had access in middle or high school to reading materials, Internet access, or spaces (such as a GSA or a Safe Zone) specifically pertaining to queer identities is telling.

With the support of their LEAs and administrators in secondary schools, teachers and staff should begin opening up spaces and services to meet the needs of all students. This includes GSAs, Safe Zones, gender-neutral spaces, school counselors and psychologists, school nurses, libraries, and Internet access. For teachers and school librarians, participants in this study illustrated the limitations placed upon adolescents regarding reading materials and texts that are available to them in middle and high schools. No participant reported reading much young adult literature during these years and only one participant recalled having access to young adult literature with queer content at school during adolescence. The growing field of young adult literature, which now has diverse, quality titles for and about queer or questioning youth (Cart & Jenkins, 2006), offers teachers and librarians valuable tools in helping students connect to the
experiences and perspectives of Others (Rohlfing, Rehm, & Goecke, 2003; Martino, 2009; Alsup, 2010; Blackburn, 2012).

Denying the inclusion of young adult literature either in classrooms or on the school library shelves should be addressed and rectified by teachers and librarians in middle and high schools. Participants in this study were all avid readers during adolescence, engaging in a broad range of genres and formats. The fact that no participant reported reading or having access to young adult literature (much less queer young adult literature) in middle or high school is a major finding of this study. Teachers, librarians, and administrators should not only learn from the experiences and recommendations of participants in this study regarding queer young adult literature, but also begin to include ways and spaces that this evolving genre can get into the hands of middle and high school students.

Recommendations for Teacher Education Programs

There are also implications from this study for the roles that teacher education programs (TEPs) can play in the pursuit of creating equitable and supportive secondary schools for queer or questioning adolescents. Although some TEPs do engage future teachers in conversations or activities around queer identities, findings from the everyday lived experiences of participants in this study and the ongoing research about how queer identities are addressed in secondary schools all point to ways that TEPs can more effectively train preservice teachers in strategies of engagement and understanding regarding queer or questioning students. Research studies focused on this phenomenon point to the ways in which teachers and schools are not embodying the potential of multicultural education in diverse ways to reach all students attending middle and high schools across the country. Particularly regarding queer identities, TEPs must relay the urgency of including these voices and perspectives to future generations of preservice teachers.
instead of simply reproducing the status quo (erasure, silence, ignoring, marginalization). In order to convey to students a positive approach to ideas of gender, sexual orientation, and expression, TEPs should provide future teachers the exposure, understanding, and tools necessary to break down heteronormativity in schools in order to help students understand the socially constructed nature of sexuality (Yescavange & Alexander, 1997).

To engage in this pursuit, TEPs should directly educate future teachers about the historical, social, and cultural reality and diversity of queer identities. This includes direct instruction about what queer identities encompass (historically and contemporarily) and relaying to preservice teachers the languaging, pronouns, and spectrum queer youth use to define themselves in the world. Ideas around the fluidity of sexuality that youth embody should be recognized by preservice teachers and incorporated into their understanding of how to work harmoniously and supportively with today’s students attending secondary schools across the U.S. TEPs should also instill in preservice teachers the tremendous power and potential they have as future educators of secondary school students. From their everyday interactions with students to interventions in teasing or bullying, preservice teachers must understand that the approaches and attitudes they bring to their future students can offer an important level of support during these years, or can stifle or quash a student’s spirit (or identity).

Another recommendation TEPs should incorporate in their training of preservice teachers revolves around curricular integration. Participants in this study discussed specific areas of curricula that secondary schools should be integrating with queer identities including: accurate historical lessons to students (covering a spectrum of diverse historical figures, events, and contributions), contemporary issues that affect youth, discussions of prejudice and discrimination in social science courses, and access to culturally relevant reading materials (such as young adult
literature with diverse characters, including queer adolescents). Preservice teachers should incorporate the long line of queer literary endeavors (from Sappho to contemporary queer young adult literature) into their curricular and pedagogical understanding in order to use these texts in their future classrooms. The perspectives of the participants in this study and previous research illustrates that all adolescents deserve access to high quality, relevant literature through public institutions, such as schools and libraries (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009; Crumpler & Wedwick, 2001; Stallworth, 2006). TEPs should instill in future generations of teachers the potential they have in this pursuit because they are the ones selecting what texts to read in class, what books to have on their classroom shelves, what books to include in summer reading lists, and represent gatekeepers in terms of access to reading materials for secondary students. Although TEPs do not have autonomy over what takes place in schools on a daily basis, they do have specific implications from the findings of this study regarding addressing queer identities in schools and in the curriculum and they should at least begin incorporating these ideas into their approaches for training future educators.

Implications for Research

This study engaged in phenomenological qualitative research to learn from out college students about their everyday lived experiences of navigating secondary school as a queer or questioning adolescent. The impetus and findings of this study are aligned with previous qualitative inquiry projects invested in learning about the complexities of life for queer people and educational research agendas specifically focused on this phenomenon. The findings of this study have implications not only for the field of qualitative inquiry, but also for educational research in general regarding how queer identities, experiences, content, contributions, and support structures are dealt with in schools.
Recommendations for Qualitative Research

The evolving field of qualitative inquiry has always been invested in the recovery of marginalized voices in the pursuit of creating more equitable and diverse understandings of the experiences of Others. Particularly for queer or questioning youth, studies using a qualitative framework can offer valuable insight into the everyday lived experiences of navigating heteronormative, oppressive, and often homophobic environments. While quantitative studies exploring these issues are certainly necessary to establish a baseline and recognition of the disconnect between what queer youth are experiencing in schools and the possibilities in this work, more projects incorporating qualitative methodologies and orientations are needed to explore the complexities and contours of these experiences. Instead of narrowing down or seeking a universal truth on the phenomenon, qualitative inquiry research projects allow us a more complicated understanding of what queer youth experience on a daily basis in schools and communities. I am reminded in this call that queer youth present endlessly creative and productive voices in this pursuit. As Driver (2008) states, “Queer youth cultures defy narrow definitions and open up new ways of understanding and imagining what it means to be a youth today.”

Qualitative researchers must also be an active voice in the growing momentum for recognizing the complexity and humanity of queer lives and bodies in every facet of our society. Educational contexts offer researchers promising sites for exploring these issues because schools are compulsory, can offer students much needed information and support during these years, and they represent institutional spaces where ideologies are continually perpetuated on future generations of youth. We need more qualitative research studies directly learning from these everyday lived experiences of marginalized groups navigating their way through secondary
schools in order to learn about the consequences of support structures, services, and academic engagements available to them in schools and communities. Those invested in research agendas using qualitative inquiry should also think through the participants they are researching in order to learn about the complexities of this issue. It would be a worthwhile pursuit to conduct more qualitative research studies in the field of education with the following participants in order to broaden our understanding of living as a queer or questioning person in a heteronormative and oppressive society: queer or questioning students embedded in secondary schools, parents of queer or questioning youth, queer parents, queer teachers/staff/administrators, transgender youth, and queer youth who have been pushed out of school, their homes, or are homeless.

Qualitative researchers also must begin opening up our lenses and approaches in this work and tap into spaces and bodies that are traditionally overlooked, stigmatized, or erased. The embodied realities of countless queer or questioning youth attending mandatory secondary schools on a daily basis around the U.S. offers tremendous potential in this pursuit. Whether we choose to look their way and attempt to learn how they understand their lives and everyday lived experiences is up to us, as educational leaders and researchers. But, as Cherland and Harper (2007) remind us:

At the heart of advocacy work has been questions and challenges concerning which bodies are and are not present in public schooling, how bodies are named and produced in schools, and how hierarchies of bodies are organized and subjugated by social class, race, ethnicity, gender, and other forms of social difference. (p. 229)

Research agendas and projects using qualitative inquiry should strategically think through not only the participants and settings, but also the kinds of questions we are asking. Queer bodies in educational settings—students and adults, visible and indiscernible—deserve further attention in
research in an attempt to learn about the complexities of their everyday lived experiences in traditionally heternormative and oppressive spaces.

Due to the complexity of growing up queer in an oppressive society and the “at-risk” classification that is traditionally put upon queer youth in research and media, we also must begin working toward more liberatory research agendas that tap into the beautifully diverse and endlessly productive ways that queer youth are navigating these spaces and institutions. This includes more participatory frameworks of qualitative inquiry that views participants as equal contributors and valuable members of a research project. There is also possibility in this work to include more performative ethnographies that allow participants a space to see their words and perspectives displayed as an artistic expression in order to speak to the overarching phenomenon. Finally, the field of qualitative inquiry should follow the advice of Norman K. Denzin in his call to infuse human rights approaches into our research in order to rectify past injustices and work toward liberating our individual and collective understandings of being in the world. According to Denzin and Giardina (2010):

Qualitative research scholars have an obligation to change the world, to engage in ethical work that makes a positive difference. We are challenged to confront the facts of injustice, to make the injustices of history visible and hence open to change and transformation. (p. 36)

Recommendations for Educational Research

It is important to understand how the findings of this study are aligned with previous research projects exploring the lives and perspectives of queer youth navigating secondary school environments. This study is in line with a growing trend in the U.S. and international contexts that is actively working to produce research, texts, activist strategies, campaigns, and
media representations focusing on the diverse spectrum of queer youth. Findings from this qualitative phenomenological study help to bring the perspectives, stories, and everyday lived experiences of queer youth navigating middle and high schools to the forefront in more nuanced, complex ways. This study directly builds off the work of nonprofit organizations and initiatives, such as the GLSEN National School Climate Survey (NSCS) (Kosciw, et al, 2012), which quantitatively assesses the experiences of queer or questioning youth embedded in secondary school environments every two years.

Findings from the latest NSCS study released in 2012 revealed that only 16.8% of participants were taught positive representations about queer people, history, or events in their schools, which was an increase from the findings from previous years of research (Kosciw, et al, 2012). The latest NSCS study also showed that students still do not have adequate access to queer content in their textbooks, on the shelves of their school libraries, or through Internet searches at school. Although the impetus and findings of the biennial NSCS study have generated much impact on the recognition of the experiences of queer or questioning adolescents in school environments and created a baseline on this topic, the voices, perspectives, and everyday lived experiences of the participants in this study illustrate that quantitative representations can only go so far in the pursuit of creating equitable and supportive learning environment for queer or questioning youth. The fact that no participant in this study reported ever learning positive representations of queer identities in schools (combined with their lack of access to spaces, services, and materials for queer youth) allows us to understand these issues in new, more complicated ways. Quantitative research studies present numerical representations to speak to the guiding issue and qualitative inquiry acknowledges the complex, nuanced, and often contradictory experiences that people have around a phenomenon.
To understand the experiences, effects, and potential of secondary school environments on the lives and bodies of queer youth, more qualitative studies are needed in order to learn from the stories, voices, and perspectives of people who have (or are living through) this phenomenon. The field of educational research would benefit greatly from more qualitative studies that not only learn from the everyday lived experiences of queer or questioning youth, but also employ these findings in the pursuit of making secondary school environments and programming more equitable and supportive. Educational research could learn from the development of additional qualitative studies that use queer or questioning youth embedded and embodied in secondary schools to learn about their everyday lived experiences navigating these environments.

Educational research would also benefit from more qualitative studies using the perspectives of teachers, staff, administrators, and policymakers on this subject. In order to understand adults as gatekeepers of information, spaces, and services for adolescents during their experiences in schooling, it is imperative that we tap into their perspectives to learn the rationales and reasoning behind the inclusion or erasure of queer content in middle and high schools. Potential participants that could offer insight on this subject include: queer teachers, straight and/or cisgender teachers, principals, school counselors and psychologists, superintendents, board of education members, and local/state/federal policymakers. Additionally, more qualitative studies are needed that explore how preservice teachers understand the diverse identities and needs of queer youth and how to best incorporate queer content and pedagogical decisions in curricula. Settings for these studies could include traditional sites of teacher education programs (such as colleges and universities) or new models, like Teach for America.

Finally, in order to speak to the spaces, services, and materials available to secondary students, more educational research is needed that looks to the artifacts used in middle and high
schools. By exploring school policies, formal and informal rules, materials, and overall school programming, qualitative researchers could provide a more complex and accurate representation of the availability and support structures that do (or do not) exist for secondary students. One area of educational research that should be explored further, as evidenced by the findings of this study, revolves around access to relevant, quality young adult literature for adolescents. The fact that none of the participants read young adult literature (and certainly not queer young adult literature) or reported having access to these texts in their respective school environments during adolescence is alarming. With the ever-expanding titles of young adult literature that cover a spectrum of identities, conflicts, and themes, we need investigations into why secondary schools are not offering these titles to students, either in curricula or on the bookshelves. Research is also needed on the impact of having access, either in curricula or in a school library, to quality young adult literature that incorporates queer characters or themes and the influences this might have on queer or questioning youth (and all students) during adolescence.

**Implications for Policymaking**

Findings from this study also have direct implications for policymaking at the local, state, and federal levels for addressing the identities, needs, and support structures for queer or questioning youth and staff of secondary schools. Because public K-12 schools are funded at the local, state, and federal levels, policies enacted on these levels also directly influence, regulate, and govern not only how schools operate but also whose identities are supported in these spaces and whose are erased or marginalized. Recommendations participants proposed in this research study offer policymakers much needed insight into policies that would open up school environments to be more supportive and attentive to the identities and needs of queer or questioning students, teachers, and staff.
**Recommendations for Local Policies**

Hiring practices, curricula, instructional considerations, programming, and the daily operations of public schools are heavily influenced by local policies. Based on the findings of this study, there are specific recommendations that local policymakers should take into consideration when strategically working to meet the needs of their respective communities. Again, whether visible or not, whether we choose to look their way or ignore them, queer people are in every community and interact with every public school in the U.S., at some point or another.

One of the main ways local policymakers could have a profound impact on the ways queer identities and bodies are treated in schools is through the inclusion of new categories in their discrimination, harassment/bullying, and hiring policies. By including sexual orientation and gender expression (which encompass the queer spectrum) as classes of people who cannot be discriminated against in hiring practices and instances of harassment and bullying, schools would automatically become safer and more supportive environments for queer or questioning students and teachers/staff (and presumably to all members in a school community). Additionally, participants in this study did not know of any teacher or adult who was out during middle or high school. Participants presumed the reasoning behind this silencing was due to the lack of job protections queer people experienced in their communities stemming from the lack of inclusive provisions in their local (or state’s) hiring and discrimination policies. These policies should expand to include categories of sexual orientation and gender expression in order to offer the same level of job security and protections for queer people in schools that their straight or cisgender peers enjoy on a daily basis.
Another recommendation that local policymakers should consider from the findings of this study revolves around the overall functioning and operations of secondary schools. Participants in this study spoke about not having a history or sense of place as a result of the erasure, stigmatization, ignoring, or negative experiences with queer content and contributions in their middle and high school experiences. LEAs and local policymakers should put into policy the provision that educators must include diverse, factual representations of queer people (in addition to all marginalized voices and perspectives) in secondary school curricula at all levels. This includes queer historical figures and contributions, literary endeavors, social science classes, and sex education. Additionally, local policymakers should see the urgency and benefits of developing and cultivating spaces and support services for queer or questioning youth in secondary schools. Participants called for adequate access to information on health issues in their middle and high school environments (either through a school nurse trained on the specific health issues affecting queer or questioning youth or through a partnership with the local health department). Although funding is typically an issue regarding their inclusion in the staff of secondary schools, almost every participant in this study spoke about the benefits of having access to school counselors and psychologists who have received training for working with queer youth and operate in confidentiality.

Finally, local policymakers are also implicated in the findings of this study regarding levels of support and access for implementing programming and policies that would directly support and help queer or questioning youth navigating secondary schools on a daily basis. The fact that no participant could access any material on school computers pertaining to queer identities (including historical contributions, literary criticism, and health issues) could be easily rectified by changes to local policies regarding what filters and blocks are put upon schools’ web
browsers. Local policymakers should support teachers and staff in secondary school in their pursuit of creating safe, supportive environments for their student populations. Policymakers can do this by enacting policies that support (not prohibit, punish, or stifle) student or teacher initiated programs in middle and high schools, like GSAs and Safe Zones, and gender-neutral spaces, such as bathrooms and locker rooms. A final area of support that local policymakers could work toward is the inclusion of and access to high quality, relevant texts and materials for diverse populations attending secondary schools. School libraries, curricula, and reading lists should include texts written for and about adolescents. With the growing field of quality young adult literature, which covers a spectrum of identities and perspectives including queer youth, the opportunities are ripe for local policymakers to support schools and teachers in the integration of these texts in their programming and materials available for student populations.

**Recommendations for State and Federal Policies**

The crucial need for state legislative bodies to not only understand the complex lives and identities of queer people but to also support and implement policies protecting them in society became clear through the findings in this study. Without state legislation that encourages the full recognition, protection, and support of the spectrum of queer identities in public spaces, we cannot expect to see different results pertaining to the experiences, levels of support and academic engagement, and overall treatment of queer people in K-12 schools. Local policymakers, teachers, and secondary schools themselves can do very little by way of recognizing or supporting queer or questioning youth in the face of state legislation that makes it almost impossible for LEAs to put into place nondiscrimination policies, curricula, spaces and services, and materials for queer adolescents. The erasure or stigmatization of queer recognition
and rights in state legislative bodies results in queer people being invisible or left vulnerable to persecuted by people and institutions in that state, as mandated by law.

We can look to state policies that illustrate the limitations and possibilities in this work. On one end, the U.S. currently has eight states with state laws prohibiting teachers and schools from promoting any positive representations of queer identities to students attending public schools (Kosciw, et al, 2012). Some of these states, including the state where this research study was conducted, mandate teachers relay to students that homosexuality is illegal or a non-acceptable lifestyle if the topic is ever breached in schools. Although teachers often get around this law by simply ignoring queer topics altogether in schools, as evidenced by the responses of the in-state participants in this study, the existence of these state laws results in the erasure, stigmatization, and persecution of queer people and therefore must end. Again, it is important to note that many states also do not have hate crime legislation, discrimination policies, or job protection classifications for queer people, thus making the proliferation of oppression legally justified in many states.

It is important to also look to state policies and laws that are actively attempting to rectify past discriminatory frameworks that marginalize or silence queer identities in public spaces. The Fair, Accurate, Inclusive and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act signed into law in the state of California during the development of this research study now mandates the inclusion of positive representations of queer content in public schools (Rosario, 2013). We must look to the development and implementation of this law (and other similar policies) and the impact they have on queer students, teachers, and schools as well as how they influence every member in a school community. State legislative bodies have an obligation to not only meet the needs of all the students attending public schools within their jurisdiction, but to also put into policies and
laws specific protections for particularly oppressed or marginalized groups in order to create more equitable and conducive learning environments for all students.

There are also implications from this study that speak to federal policies and laws that would help in the pursuit of supporting and enriching the lives of queer or questioning youth in society and schools. Most recently, President Obama signed an executive order on workplace protections prohibiting discrimination against queer federal employees which includes provisions for gender identity and trans* people (Bendery, 2014). This executive order affects “roughly 28 million workers, or about one-fifth of the nation's workforce.” The amendment was added to a preexisting executive order that outlines categories of discrimination that are prohibited in federal contracts. In 2002, President George W. Bush signed a provision to the same executive order exempting religiously affiliated federal contractors from the obligations of the order. Although the executive order only applies to federal employees and does not apply to religiously affiliated federal contractors, it will be interesting to see how the implications of this executive order play out in educational contexts across the U.S.

Throughout history, minorities that have been marginalized or stigmatized in society have often looked to the federal government for solutions that states will not provide. President Obama’s executive order dealing with federal contractors illustrates a clear example of the executive branch taking steps to provide protections for the queer community where some states would not. We need more initiatives from the federal government that not only put protections and support structures in place for queer students and teachers, but that also prevent state governments from targeting and persecuting queer people.

One way to ensure that all students—regardless of difference—are protected and supported in schools is through the creation of a federal, constitutional right to education, which
includes protected classes or groups of people based on gender, race, class, nationality, and a spectrum of queer identities. Unless we begin to recognize access to adequate secondary education as a fundamental, constitutional right in the U.S., marginalized communities will continue to be vulnerable to the local politics of states, LEAs, and teachers. As it stands now in many states, the experiences that queer students have navigating middle and high school are dependent upon the good nature of their teachers, the governing ideologies of their school district, and/or the types of laws that are being passed in their state legislative bodies. The creation of a federal right to education would lead to these issues no longer being about political discussions and could give marginalized students in every state a federal private right of action (day in court) in order to speak out against any mistreatment that infringes on their academic pursuits. A right to an education would mandate that school administrators must reasonably address the educational needs of all students, regardless of identity. Queer people, as illustrated in the perspectives and stories of the participants in this study, need the highest levels of protection from the federal government in order to ensure that every queer or questioning student, teacher, and staff member in schools across the U.S. are equally protected and valued in our society.

**Implications for My Own Practice**

As researcher, educator, and a gay man concerned about the lives and possibilities of all queer youth, I have gained a tremendous amount of resolve throughout the development and implementation of this research study to undertake the work necessary to make schools and communities safer, more understanding, and more supportive for queer or questioning adolescents. Most assuredly, meeting with and getting to know the dynamic, unique, and diverse participants involved in this study have been the most valuable benefits of this project to me.
personally. Throughout our interactions in interviews and focus groups, there was a sense of solidarity and support for the everyday lived experiences they shared about navigating middle and high school as a queer or questioning student.

I personally found these spaces and interactions extraordinarily significant because they offered participants (and myself) an outlet to not only value our experiences and perspectives on this phenomenon (which is traditionally erased, ignored, or marginalized), but more importantly to use our voices to urge all secondary schools to provide fully-inclusive and welcoming learning environments for queer or questioning youth. From curricular to pedagogical implications, the participants brought such insightful recommendations to this study that would have profound effects on queer or questioning students (and all students) in secondary schools, if implemented. Without their voices, time, stories, perspectives, and recommendations, this study would not have been possible and I am eternally grateful to them for demonstrating the strength and beauty found in the spectrum of queer identities that exist in this world.

Throughout this research project, I have also gained an immeasurable amount of fortitude in this work and a stronger call for an urgency in the pursuit of both rectifying the negligence that public schools have traditionally demonstrated toward queer youth and working to create fully supportive and equitable learning environments for all students. My experiences in the development of this study certainly inform how I understand the possibilities of qualitative inquiry and how I will use this approach to learn from the voices and experiences of queer youth in my future lifework. Educators, schools, and researchers have much work to do in the pursuit of cultivating more nuanced understandings about the complicated yet dynamic phenomenon of growing up queer in a heteronormative and oppressive society. This includes calls for the
recovery of the contributions and identities of queer people throughout history and the inclusion of queer voices in every aspect of educational programming.

In my lifework, I will continue to look to the endlessly creative and resilient ways that queer youth are rejecting heteronormative ideologies in their lives and embodying new ways of being in the world that is aligned with however they choose to identify. I am reminded of Susan Driver’s (2003) call:

Queer youth challenge us to rethink the very status of gender, generation, sexuality, and culture, and they push us to become nuanced in the ways we read, watch, and listen to young people telling their own stories and envisioning their futures (p. 1).

For me, this means working to create more momentum and spaces that allow diverse queer youth to explore and negotiate these ideas in safe and supportive environments. Part of this work means listening and learning in more nuanced ways to the embodied, everyday lived experiences of queer youth as they tell their stories. Another aspect for me revolves around providing queer adolescents with more access to diverse, relevant, and quality texts written for and about their lives and identities. The expanding and vibrant field of young adult literature offers adolescents endless possibilities for seeing and understanding the complexities and beauty of queer life during their formative years. I remain committed to helping adolescents see the possibilities of the written word and the power of young adult literature to help them not only see their own identities and perspectives reflected in stories, but also learn from the experiences of Others through literary interactions.

Finally, as a way to learn from the voices and perspectives of queer youth regarding their experiences in educational settings, I will pursue strategies of engagement that allow them to tell their stories and speak truth to power. The writing prompt participants completed in this study,
which asked them to write back to their former schools or teachers about their experiences navigating their secondary school years as a queer or questioning student, was an insightful endeavor. The meticulously thoughtful responses participants offered on this piece illustrated to me that not only do queer people need outlets to speak back to their former teachers and schools, but just as importantly, teachers also should receive these letters and reflect on how they can be a part of the effort to make schools safer and more supportive for queer or questioning students. Although there is much work ahead, the experiences, interactions, lessons, and training I have received as a result of this research project give me the strength to forge ahead in this journey to full recognition, support, and equity for all queer students in educational spaces and society.

Conclusions

This research study adds to the growing awareness and calls for educational institutions, spaces, and policymakers to take into consideration how the unique identities, perspectives, and needs that queer or questioning youth embody are being represented and supported in all aspects of their programming and implementation. Educators, administrators, and researchers who are invested in the constant progression of public education are also implicated in this study and should take into consideration how and where queer identities, content, historical and literary contributions, health issues, and support structures are included in K-12 schools. Particularly for the secondary school level, a time when adolescents are grappling with issues of identity and desperately need fully inclusive and supportive spaces and instruction about the diverse reality of humanity, teachers and adults working with middle and high school students have tremendous opportunities to learn from the perspectives and everyday lived experiences of the participants presented in this study. Hopefully, school systems, individual schools, and/or teachers
themselves will begin to implement the recommendations participants offered in this study for making life better for future generations of queer or questioning youth in secondary schools.

Because this project sought to qualitatively speak to how adolescents experienced, understood, and lived through the overarching issues guiding this project, learning and hearing specifically from queer youth participants themselves reveals extremely powerful and necessary voices in this work. Ultimately, by generating more counternarratives, perspectives, research-based projects, and qualitative (and quantitative) data on this topic, we can potentially build more complex understandings and cultivate more spaces to address the identities of all students in U.S. schools. The growing momentum of quantitative and qualitative research documenting the experiences and realities of life for queer or questioning youth combined with the expanding visibility of queer people in all facets of U.S. society (and internationally) lead us to a time in which full inclusion in public schools is upon us.

This study relied on qualitative research methodologies to learn about the complex realities of growing up queer in a heteronormative, homophobic, and oppressive society. Seidman (1998) offers insight into the purposes and possibilities of qualitative inquiry as a means to better understand the complex lives of people as they navigate the world:

By presenting the stories of participants’ experience, interviewers open up for readers the possibility of connecting their own stories to those presented in the study. In connecting, readers may not learn how to control or predict the experience being studied or their own, but they will understand better their complexities. They will appreciate more the intricate ways in which individual lives interact with social and structural forces and, perhaps, be more understanding and even humble in the face of those intricacies. Understanding and humility are not bad stances from which to try to effect improvement in education. (p. 45)
Hopefully, this research study allows readers an opportunity to better understand the complexities of the experiences, perspectives, and recommendations participants offered and consider ways to make educational systems safer, more supportive, and more responsible to queer or questioning youth with humility.

The voices of youth are traditionally ignored or infantilized in our society, particularly regarding their perspectives on critical matters or policymaking. The identities, lives, and bodies of queer or questioning youth have been ignored, marginalized, erased, tortured, misunderstood, distorted, and killed in our society (and internationally). We must begin to look to and learn from the everyday lived experiences of young people in order to learn how we as a society are moving forward. Particularly for youth whose identities propel some in society to immediately label them deviant, educators, administrators, policymakers, and researchers have obligations to ensure that their needs and identities are being met in public schools. Although U.S. culture has certainly made tremendous strides regarding queer visibility and attainment of rights over the past 45 years since the Stonewall Riots marked the official beginning of the Queer Rights Movement, we still have a long way to go. As pointed out in this study, either in Chapter II or through the stories of participants who embodied this idea in their middle and high school experiences, queer identities, content, spaces, and support structures are highly contested and challenged ideas for many in our society. Throughout the development of this research study, many developments occurred on the local and national levels that beautifully illustrated the complexities and possibilities in this work.

Life-Savers Ministries, a Christian organization founded in 1996 in Opelika, Alabama that provides Biblically-based activities and educational materials for youth coming from at-risk environments, erected a billboard not far from where this study was conducted depicting children
with two quotes: “He alone, who owns the youth, gains the future" and "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” The first quote is attributed to Adolf Hitler and the second is a Bible verse (Hafiz, 2014). Around the same time, Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore (who was removed from his chief justice position in 2003 for refusing to obey a federal court order to remove his Ten Commandments monument from the state courthouse), made a speech to Washington state's 28th District Republican Club and spoke to the highly contentious nature of queer rights and inclusion in public schools (Ashtari, 2014a). Part of Moore’s statements, which were captured on video, include the following:

We ought to go back to an understanding that God determined that a woman be fit for a man and created a woman for a man ... we can’t change that. That’s not what same-sex marriage is about anyway. It’s not about two men getting married or two women, it’s about destroying an institution ordained of God. It’s about feeling good but ignoring God’s laws for happiness, for civilization, for progress as the United States Supreme Court recognizes. I’m glad they’re [Founding Fathers] not here with us to see the mess we’re in, how we’ve given up our righteousness for a life of indulgent sin, when abortion is no longer called murder, when sodomy is deemed a right, when good is now called evil, and darkness is now called light. I don’t think we need to submit to the liberal agenda any longer and think they’re going to win ... God’s waiting to see what we do, what we as his people, called by his name will do. Our children are told they can’t pray in school and they teach them evolution. Why can’t they see the fear of God is the only true solution? Our schools have become a battleground while all across the land, Christians just shrug their shoulders, afraid to take a stand.
People are entitled to their own belief systems and we have the right to freedom of speech in the U.S. This is true for Life-Savers Ministries who erected the billboard, Chief Justice Moore who spoke at a private function, and Pastor John MacArthur of California who told listeners on his radio show in June of 2014 that parents of gay kids should “alienate them” and “turn them over to Satan” (Sieczkowski, 2014). However, we as a society also have an obligation to look to those in positions of power or authority in our culture, listen to the messages they are emitting, monitor how those people exercise their power, and evaluate the consequences of those ideologies on the lives and bodies of queer or questioning youth. In Mississippi, the Republican governor signed into law the Mississippi Religious Freedom Restoration Act mandating abstinence only sex education that teaches youth that a "monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the only appropriate setting for sexual intercourse" and requires teachers to tell students that homosexuality is illegal (Ashtari, 2014b). With the tremendous strides Queer Rights Movements have been making in U.S. institutions, policies, and society over the past decade, these recent examples of conservative leaders attempting to use their positions of power to further silence, marginalize, stymie, erase, stigmatize, or kill the momentum can be seen as desperate attempts to hold onto an oppressive status quo. These maneuvers are also increasingly becoming more visible and polarizing to society, and arguably more futile in the wake of the progress individuals and coalitions have been making for queer rights each and every day across the U.S. (and internationally).

During the time period of this research study, many positive examples of queer visibility and inclusion in society have also taken place that directly contradict the messaging and ideologies of those who oppose queer rights in U.S. society. Woodrow Wilson High School in Washington, D.C. became a national case study for how adolescents and adults are leading the
way for how to beautifully address the identities and needs of queer people in society. Students at the school have participated in the annual Pride Day celebrations in the District of Columbia for the past few years, which resulted in the Westboro Baptist Church targeting the school to protest (Brown, 2014). Not only did Wilson students decide to continue their participation at the 2014 Pride Day events despite receiving threats from the conservative group, but they also decided to stage a peaceful counter protest to the Westboro Baptist Church coming to town as a way to demonstrate their solidarity and support with queer or questioning youth (Brown, 2014). As a result, the 50-year-old principal of the school, Pete Cahall, made a national declaration that he is “a proud gay man” in front of his students celebrating Pride Day and accompanied by D.C.’s mayor and an openly-gay City Councilman (Klein, 2014). One of the Wilson students in attendance that day was quoted as saying, “The message of Pride Day is that as a public school in our Nation’s Capitol, we support LGBTQ+ students, and we are committed to making our school and our Capitol a safer and more welcoming space for everyone” (Brown, 2014). This story is significant and inspiring for me because I began my teaching career in D.C. Public Schools at John Hayden Johnson Middle School.

Indeed, students themselves are often the ones demonstrating what it looks like to publically fight for queer rights on a daily basis. This is particularly insightful when youth are enacting these demonstrations in spaces that traditionally disregard or stigmatize queer identities, such as religious institutions. But some recent developments in religious schools show progress in these spaces as well. After implementing a GSA in their high school, students graduating from a secondary Catholic school in northern Canada wore rainbow socks to demonstrate solidarity with queer or questioning youth (Murray, 2014). An all-girls Catholic high school in California also began allowing students to use their chosen gender and/or name at the 2014
graduation, resulting in a transgender male student being able to wear a suit and use his preferred name at the ceremony instead of a dress like the rest of his classmates (Shine, 2014). Both these stories illustrate how progress can be made on these issues: from the initiation of student perspectives and voices and with support of their teachers and administrators.

In terms of policy changes during the time, an Alabama appeals court overturned an anti-sodomy law prohibiting consensual homosexual intercourse, finding it unconstitutional—which seems appropriate since the U.S. Supreme Court made a decision on this matter that essentially nullified Alabama’s law over a decade ago in the Lawrence vs. Texas (2003) case (Green, 2014). In the wake of this decision, Alabama legislators are reconsidering the constitutionality of the state law mandating that teachers in public schools relay to students that homosexuality is illegal and not a preferred lifestyle (Toner, 2014). The New York City Department of Education also began implementing fully inclusive and protective guidelines targeting teachers and schools for meeting the needs of transgender students (Molloy, 2014a). On a federal level, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights also issued a statement indicating that, “Title IX's sex discrimination prohibition extends to claims of discrimination based on gender identity or failure to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity or femininity and OCR accepts such complaints for investigation” (Molloy, 2014b). While the guidelines, implementation, and scope of this proclamation remain unclear, the fact that the federal government of the U.S. is beginning to take the steps to create equitable conditions and standards for queer or questioning youth in public schools is promising.

Recently, schools and educators have also gained more tools and support for addressing the needs of queer or questioning youth through the initiatives and campaigns of many nonprofit organizations. GLSEN culminated its Safe Space campaign by distributing over 100,000 kits
containing a guide on how to be a queer ally with posters and stickers to over 63,000 schools across the U.S. (Davidson, 2013). The Anti-Defamation League and Teaching Tolerance also have an increasing number of free curricular materials and information on queer identities available on their websites for schools and educators. A new campaign initiated by GLSEN, the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE), and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) targets teacher education programs in a move to better engage future teachers about the individual needs, perspectives, and identities of queer or questioning youth (McCabe, 2014). Finally, for those eight states where it is illegal to promote positive representations of queer identities in schools (including the state where this research was conducted), a national campaign was launched called No Promo Homo to target these policies and hopefully rectify their damaging and stigmatizing effects.

Again, the developments detailed above have taken place throughout the implementation and completion of this research project, which illustrates not only how quickly things are evolving, but also how complexly contentious these matters are in our society. This research is timely and people are clearly speaking up and out about how queer people are viewed and treated in society. Instead of focusing on the negative, I remained focused on this moment as a larger progression of the human experience and being a fully accepted and valued member of a society, regardless of identity or background. Anna Deveare Smith offers some optimism in this pursuit as she writes, “The process of being in the world is a process of learning the world as a place full of attractive and unattractive and warm and frightful things. The power of life is that we’re always in that friction” (Smith, 1993). We must begin to tap into that power to create spaces for individuals and groups to freely explore, cultivate, and value their identities and perspectives within that society.
When marginalized groups are oppressed within a society (such as queer or questioning youth in schools), they have always and will continue to find ways to raise their voices and express their identities in society in beautifully creative and resilient ways. We can see countless strategies engaged in by queer youth and those in Queer Rights Movements over the past few decades and document how they have given their work, their words, their stories, their expressions, their lives, and their bodies to the cause. We should recognize and strategically look to marginalized groups and listen to their stories in order to recognize their humanity, harness empathy towards those who are oppressed within our society, and engage in strategies to better address the specific needs and identities of Others in all parts of our culture. In communities. In relationships. In institutions. In economics. In the justice system. In housing. In education.

It is long past time for educators, administrators, and adults who work with (and care about) young people to recognize the complex identities and needs of queer youth and invest in ways that support their educational experiences. Queer or questioning youth, as exhibited through the voices of the participants in this study, have unique perspectives to offer schools and educators because their lives are complex and often difficult to navigate due to growing up in a heteronormative, oppressive, and often homophobia society. But we, as educational leaders, must value the basic human dignity of all our diverse students in schools by recognizing the strengths of their diverse backgrounds and identities and openly acknowledge them, instead of erasing or marginalizing them. We can begin to do this by creating spaces and support structures to help nurture students’ development in safe learning environments, by protecting the humanity of all of our students through school services and educational policies, and by fighting for their inclusion in every aspect of the middle and high school experience. Part of that call is more
accurately reflecting the diversity of humanity and the complexity of our history in schools. And the opportunities are ripe: from queer colonial writings in the U.S., to the recognition of a third sex (or berdache) in many indigenous U.S. populations, to queer people running Fortune 500 companies today. It becomes a question of whose history we are teaching…whose stories and voices matter in the curriculum, in the overall school programming in secondary schools, in debates at school board meetings, library acquisitions, and who will hold schools and teachers accountable in this pursuit. In essence, we cannot continue to reproduce the status quo for how queer identities are represented and supported in schools and we must begin to make changes. We should rethink our approaches and formulate new, liberating strategies of engagement for addressing the needs and perspectives of queer identities in middle and high schools across the country. I am reminded in this call of the words of Audre Lorde (1979), as she heeded, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”

We in the educational community should look to the everyday lived experiences of youth, particularly adolescents who are stigmatized and marginalized, and learn from them directly about how to best meet their needs and represent their identities in schools. Drawing from research studies, data, media representations, and the everyday lived experiences of young people, educators and schools have tremendous opportunities to infuse this work with love for all of our students, in the tradition of Paulo Freire, Mahatmas Ghandi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. I also draw strength in this momentum from James Baldwin’s (1963) understanding of the power of love:

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word ‘love’ here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being,
or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth (p. 128)

The time is ripe to take off the masks that we fear and dare to grow together as a society in a universal quest for equity and compassion. As we evolve as a society, as a species, we continue to dare to grow and be actively involved in that friction that keeps us constantly moving forward. For educational institutions and spaces, there are remarkable opportunities to be a part of this momentum and live out our care and concern for future generations of youth. As bell hooks (2003) calls for:

Contrary to the notion that love in the classroom makes teachers less objective, when we teach with love we are better able to respond to the unique concerns of individual students while simultaneously integrating those of the classroom community. When teachers work to affirm the emotional well-being of students we are doing the work of love (p. 133).

It is my hope that this dissertation adds to the growing voices and momentum calling for queer rights across the board in our society. Educators, administrators, and researchers have ethical obligations and tremendous opportunities to think about the well being of all of the students we work with and infuse our practices and approaches with love and compassion. We owe this to those who came before, to those who did not make it out of adolescence, to those embedded in schools on a daily basis, and to future generations.
REFERENCES


www.glsen.org


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Tenets of Queer Reading Practices in Action

- Troubles social and sexual identities
- Interrogates social norms
- Unsettles traditional interpretations of the world
- Denaturalizes heteronormativity
- Engages difference, but in the teaching of literature and culture
- Analyzes normative identities within particular historical, cultural, and political contexts for interpretation
- Allows for readings that discern multiple and fluid sexualities among characters
- Analyzes the ways sexual norms have shifted throughout history
- Allows students to interrogate their own established cultural codes for reading
- Engages with the instability of identity formations and spaces for democratic deliberation and resistance

Tenets of queer reading practices synthesized by Cherland and Harper (2007, p. 77-78)
March 20, 2014

Alexander Parks
College of Education
The University of Alabama
Box 870232

Re: IRB # 14-OR-090, “A Qualitative Inquiry Exploring Out College Students’ Experiences with Queer Content in Secondary Schools”

Dear Mr. Parks:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your application will expire on March 19, 2015. If your research will continue beyond this date, please complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, please complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, please complete the Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms and flyer.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Carpaneto T. Myles, MSM, CIP, CIP
Director & Research Compliance Officer
Office for Research Compliance
The University of Alabama
SUBJECT: Research opportunity for queer college students -- help spread the word?

Greetings!

My name is Alexander Parks and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction here at the University of Alabama. I'm writing to bring your attention to an IRB approved research study that I am conducting and to ask whether you might be able to assist me in getting the word out. The study focuses on the experiences and perspectives of queer college students from their middle and high school settings, in relation to queer content in curriculum & instruction and access to queer materials.

Students who are willing to take part in the study will be asked to participate in one hour-long interview and one focus group session, that will last an hour to an hour and a half. All interviews and focus groups will be scheduled at a time and location of your convenience. Participants who complete the process will receive three complimentary books about contemporary queer life.

Students who meet the following criteria may be eligible to participate:
- Currently enrolled in college;
- Are at least 19 years of age;
- Self-identify as queer (gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, intersex, transgender, and any individual questioning their place within this spectrum);
- Willing and able to participate.

I would greatly appreciate your consideration if you could forward this email to your organization’s listserv or social media platform. Additionally, I am attaching a copy of the recruitment flyer for this research opportunity to this email. If you know of someone that may be interested, feel free to pass this email along and have them contact the researcher directly.

Thank you so much for your attention! If you would like more information or are interested in participating, please contact me (principal investigator) by responding to this email, or directly at afparks@crimson.ua.edu or call (240) 620-9177.

With gratitude,
Alexander Parks
Research Opportunity

Are you an openly queer* student at UA and at least 19 years of age?

If so, your expertise is needed to take part in a research study exploring your experiences with queer content in middle and high school. Participants will be asked to complete one interview and one focus group and will receive 3 books about queer life upon completion of the study.

To learn more or to participate, contact Alexander Parks at afparks@crimson.ua.edu or by phone at (240) 620-9177

* lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, pansexual, intersex
APPENDIX E

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA
HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM

Consent to Take Part in a Research Study

You are being asked to be in a research study.

The name of this study is:
A qualitative inquiry exploring out college students’ experiences with queer content in secondary schools

This study is being done by:
Alexander F Parks
Doctoral Student
The University of Alabama
Department of Curriculum & Instruction

Is the researcher being paid for this study?
The researcher is not being paid for this study.

Is this research developing a product that will be sold, and if so, will the investigator profit from it?
This research is not developing a product and this study serves as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree.

Does the investigator have any conflict of interest in this study?
The investigator does not have any conflict of interest in this study.

What is this study about? What is the investigator trying to learn?
This study is being conducted to explore the experiences of queer college students (gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, transgendered) with queer content and contributions in their middle and high school years.

Why is this study important or useful?
This knowledge is important/useful because the findings will help fill a void in the existing literature focusing on queer or questioning secondary students in relation to instructional and school support in the middle and high school environments. The hope is that this study will also provide an understanding of (1) how questions of sexual orientation and gender expression were dealt with in participants’ secondary school experiences; (2) how participants understood their lives in relation to queer content and contributions that were available to them in their secondary school experiences; (3) where participants accessed queer content during their secondary school years; and (4) what recommendations queer college students have for secondary schools and curricular choices that might benefit queer or questioning students during their middle and high school years.

Why have I been asked to be in this study?
You have been asked to be a part of this study because you are an openly-queer college student at the University of Alabama, are 19 years of age or older, are available and willing to contribute to the study, and your experiences and perspectives on this research topic are important and unique and will contribute greatly to the findings of this study.

How many people will be in this study?
About 5-10 other people will be in this study.

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 5.20.14
EXPIRATION DATE: 3.19.15
What will I be asked to do in this study?
If you meet the criteria and agree to be in this study, you will be asked to attend two individual interviews and one focus group conducted by the researcher. Once selected for the study, you will be asked to take part in one 60 minute individual interview and one 60-90 minute focus group session with other participants in the study. After the focus group has taken place, a final 30-45 minute individual interview will also take place to clarify information already obtained during the initial interviews and focus groups. The interviews and focus group sessions will be scheduled at a time and location of your convenience and will be audio-recorded by the researcher. All participants will be invited to participate in the member checking of interview transcriptions and during the data analysis and editing phases, but are not required to do so.

How much time will I spend being this study?
Each individual interview should take about 60 minutes and focus group sessions should take between 60-90 minutes. The total time commitment for your involvement in this study should be about 2 ½ hours to 3 hours. The entire duration for this study will take place over several weeks. Initial interviews will take about 2 weeks to schedule and complete. Focus group sessions will take one week to complete (and will proceed immediately following the culmination of the initial interviews). Final interviews will be scheduled and take place the week following the focus group sessions.

Will being in this study cost me anything?
The only cost to you for your participation in this study is your time and presence during individual interviews and/or focus groups.

Will I be compensated for being in this study?
In appreciation of your time, you will receive a book at the culmination of each interview and focus group you complete. Upon completion of your participation in this study, you will receive three books about contemporary queer life: (1) What I Love About Being Queer, 2013, by Vivek Shraya; (2) The Full Spectrum: A New Generation of Writing about Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Other Identities, 2006, Edited by David Levithan & Billy Merrell; and (3) Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence, 1994, Edited by Marion Dane Bauer.

Can the investigator take me out of this study?
The investigator may take you out of the study if something happens that means you no longer meet the study requirements, or he feels that the study is upsetting you.

What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?
Little to no risk is foreseen in your participation in this study. Your sensitivity and openness during interviews and/or focus groups will always be taken into consideration, and you may choose to end your participation at any time during the process. If at any time the researcher perceives the study to have any detrimental effects on participants or causes a conflict of interest in any way, your participation will be discontinued immediately. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants to protect their identities.

What are the benefits (good things) that may happen if I am in this study?
There are no direct benefits to you for your participation in this study. However, your participation is significant because little research exists with queer youth about their secondary school experiences in relation to queer content and contributions. The experiences, perspectives, and recommendations that you will offer through your participation in this study will offer educators, schools, researchers, and policymakers a tremendous opportunity to learn how best to meet the needs of queer or questioning students in middle and high schools across the country. You will also have a space to openly share your
experiences about a subject matter that is often silenced or ignored in larger conversations about the middle and high school experience.

**What are the benefits to science or society?**
This study will help educators, researchers, and policymakers better understand how to best meet the needs of queer or questioning students in secondary schools throughout the U.S.

**How will my privacy be protected?**
Privacy will be maintained throughout the research process. You will have the opportunity to choose your own pseudonym for the study. Individual interviews will be scheduled at a time and location that is convenient for you. Focus group sessions will take place at a public location on campus. We will be discussing your experiences during your middle and high school years in relation to school. You will be asked to reflect back upon whether or not you feel that you received any instruction or had access to queer content in your secondary school experiences. You will also have an opportunity to share your recommendations for how best to meet the needs of queer or questioning middle and high school students.

You do not have to answer any question you do not want to and may choose to end your participation at any time.

**How will my confidentiality be protected?**
Confidentiality will be protected during individual interviews and will be strongly encouraged during focus group sessions with other participants. Consent forms, transcriptions, and other relevant paperwork will be safely secured in a locked file in the researcher’s home. All audio tapes will be deleted immediately after transcription, and transcribed data will be kept on the home computer of the researcher (and is locked when not in use). All data will remain securely in the possession of the researcher for three years, after which time it will be destroyed.

The researcher may use the data for presentations or articles related to this study, but pseudonyms will be used for all participants in order to maintain their anonymity.

**What are the alternatives to being in this study? Do I have other choices?**
The alternative to being in this study is not to participate.

**What are my rights as a participant in this study?**
Taking part in this study is voluntary. It is your free choice. You can refuse to be in it at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. There will be no effect on your relations with the University of Alabama.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board (“the IRB”) is the committee that protects the rights of people in research studies. The IRB may review study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

**Who do I call if I have questions or problems?**
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study right now, please ask them. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study later on, please contact Alexander F Parks at 240-620-9177, or his advisor, Dr. Latrise Johnson at 205-348-5684.

If you have questions about your rights as a person in a research study, call Ms. Tanta Myles, the Research Compliance Officer of the University, at 205-348-8461, or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066.
You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html or email the Research Compliance office at participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu.

After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online at the outreach website or you may ask the investigator for a copy of it and mail it to the University Office for Research Compliance, Box 870127, 358 Rose Administration Building, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127.

I have read this consent form. I have had a chance to ask questions. My questions have been answered and I will receive a copy of this consent form to keep. I understand what is required of me by taking part in this study. I freely agree to participate.

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

Audio Taping Consent

As mentioned above, all individual interviews and focus groups will be audio-taped by the investigator for research purposes. These tapes will be stored in a locked file cabinet in a locked room only available to the primary investigator. Tapes will be destroyed immediately after transcription.

I understand that part of my participation in this research study will be audio-taped, and I give my permission to record the interview.

☐ Yes, my participation during formal interviews or focus groups can be audio-taped.

☐ No, I do not want my participation in formal interviews or focus groups audio-taped.

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 3-20-14
EXPIRATION DATE: 3-11-15
APPENDIX F

Queer Content in Secondary Schools Research Study
Demographic Questions*:

1. Age: _______________

2. What is your current enrollment status at UA? (Circle one: undergraduate student or graduate student)

3. Race/Ethnicity: _______________

4. Did you attend middle and high school in the state of Alabama? _______________

5. What year did you graduate high school? _______________

6. Geographic Region where you attended secondary school (Circle one: Northwest, Southwest, Midwest, Mideast, Southeast, Mid-Atlantic, Northeast, other _______________)

7. Was your middle and high school (Circle one: Public, private, parochial, other _______________)?

8. Would you characterize your middle and high school as (Circle one: Rural, Suburban, Urban, other _______________)?

9. Would you describe your high school as (Circle one: small, medium, or large sized)?

10. What is your gender? (circle one: female, male, transgender, questioning, other _______________)

11. What is your sexual orientation? (circle one: bisexual, gay, lesbian, heterosexual, questioning, other _______________)

12. How old were you when you came out? _______________

13. Name Preferred Used in Research Project (pseudonym): _______________

*You do not have to answer any question you do not feel comfortable sharing.
APPENDIX G

Interview Protocol

1. Do you feel that you had access to a space or group in your middle or high school that addressed queer issues (like a Gay/Straight Alliance)?

2. Did your school have a space for other minority groups or identity groups?

3. Did you have access to a space or group outside of school that addressed queer issues (like a nonprofit group or online space)?

4. Did you know another classmate or friend who openly identified as queer?

5. Did you know a teacher or adult at school who openly identified as queer?

6. Did you feel comfortable sharing your sexual orientation or gender expression with an adult in your school?

7. Did you have a teacher who addressed bigotry in their instruction or lessons? (racism, sexism, etc.)

8. Did you have a teacher who addressed homophobia in their instruction or lessons?

Thinking back to middle school and high school, did you have any exposure to queer content or contributions in these classes?:

- English/Language Arts
- Science
- Math
- History/Social Studies/Civics
- Physical Education (PE)
- Music/Art/Drama
- Health/Life Skills
- Sex Education

Thinking back to middle school and high school, did you have any exposure to queer content or contributions in the following spaces?:

- Classroom lesson or presentation
- From a teacher, administrator, school counselor, or staff outside of class
- School assembly
- Discussion with students outside of class
- Through library materials
- Through public announcements, posters, or other visual materials
- Student newspaper
- Through the Internet at school
• After-school clubs or activities
• After-school sports

9. During these years, did you read young adult literature that contained queer content?

10. During these years, did you read adult literature that contained queer content?

11. How did you find out about young adult literature with queer content during your middle or high school years?

12. Did your school library have books or materials for students that contained queer content?

13. Where were some of the places you accessed queer content (literature, magazines, history, etc.) during your teenage years?

14. When you had to self-select a book to read in school (for book reports, silent sustained reading, etc.), did you feel comfortable reading a book with queer content?

15. If you had access to or read young adult literature with queer content during your middle or high school years, what were some of your favorite titles or authors or genres?
APPENDIX H

Focus Group Protocol

1. Do you feel that your interactions with queer content or contributions in school positively or negatively influenced your understanding of self and why?

2. Did you have any support in school (even if that support was not queer specific) that helped you develop your sense of self? (teachers, peers, counselors, clubs, etc.)

3. Most participants shared that they received no direct instruction on queer content or contributions in their secondary school experiences. Thinking back, what messages did you receive about yourself-as a student and as a whole human being-through your classes and overall experiences in middle and high school?

4. Where would you say were the main places you received information about queer topics during adolescence?

5. Looking back, do you believe that your middle school was safe for students, teachers, or staff who identified as queer?

6. Looking back, do you believe that your high school was safe for students, teachers, or staff who identified as queer?

7. What would you say was the largest contributing factor to you successfully navigating your middle and high school experiences?

8. Do you believe that queer literature and contributions of queer people throughout history should be included in secondary schools’ curriculum and instruction?

9. What benefit, if any, do you feel it would offer all students to include issues of gender and sexual orientation in schools?

10. Feel free to draw from what you just wrote for this last question, but I’d love to have a conversation or brainstorming session with you about practical ways secondary schools or communities could be better addressing queer or questioning teenagers through the curriculum, through teachers’ instruction, through the overall school climate, or through community programs. So, my final question for y’all is: how and where would you recommend spaces where middle or high school students could access positive representations of queer content? (this could be in school, something in the community, etc.)
APPENDIX I

Pseudonym: ____________________________________________

You have the platform to write a letter or statement to your former middle or high school teacher or teachers to speak back to the education you received from them, particularly in relation to queer identities. Please choose a specific teacher, group of teachers, whole school—however you wish to approach this—and try to address the following questions in your letter/writing:

- How did the access you received from your teachers and staff about queer content and contributions in society make you feel about yourself, now that you are looking back?
- What would you like to relay to your teachers and administrators about supporting and educating all of the students in the school—particularly queer or questioning students?
- What specifically could they be doing to better educate students about queer representations in curriculum and instruction?
- What are some recommendations you would offer your teachers to make the educational experience in that school better for queer or questioning students?

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