BEING AND BECOMING AN ACTIVIST: SCHOOL COUNSELORS WHO ANSWER THE CALL FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE WITH REGARD TO LGBTQ++ STUDENTS

A Dissertation in
Counselor Education & Supervision

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August 2016
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ABSTRACT

This is a study of the activist identity trajectories and the experiences of four school counselors notably engaged in activism for LGBTQ++ students. Using arts-based narrative inquiry, a series of two interviews were completed with each participant. Three research questions informed this study: a) What is salient in shaping the participants’ activist identities with regard to the LGBTQ++ community?, b) In what ways are school counselors activists for and with LGBTQ++ students?, and c) What motivates and sustains school counselors’ social justice efforts? Data analysis was guided by empirical-phenomenological psychology and the theoretical framework, critical social theory, to present findings in three forms – case synopses crafted from the participant’s interviews in order to contextualize findings, illustrated narratives that highlight commonalities, and a visual collage. The results of this study highlight three commonalities among participant data: a) Identifying with the LGBTQ++ community, b) Pattern of recognizing oppression and working towards change, and c) Education as a form of activism. Implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research are discussed.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation holds the contribution of many voices and hearts. I am indebted to my committee for their careful guidance of this pursuit. Dr. Katie Kostohryz’s creativity and enthusiasm have been inspiring over the years. She taught me that humor and fun do have a place in academia and daydreaming out loud about a million and one research ideas is all part of it. Thanks to Dr. Peggy Lorah, I approached my work with the respect and care that she modeled, ever mindful to be patient with the process. Dr. Karen Keifer-Boyd knew exactly what to ask and what resources to send in order to help move this work forward. Her knowledge of arts-based research helped to refine and clarify much of this work.

My dissertation chair, Dr. JoLynn Carney, welcomed and supported my visions for this project with flexibility and grace. She stepped in to offer wise advice when needed and also provided me with space to carve out my own path. I have a tremendous amount of respect for JoLynn. Her door remained open to me, as it does with all of her students, despite her busy schedule. She continues to be one of my most profound influences for the type of counselor educator I hope to be.

To my family - My parents, Mike and Kathy, nurtured my commitment to creating a more equitable and fair world. My Dad taught me the value of hard work and to stand up for what you believe in. My Mom encouraged me to always be true and kind, and taught me that all of my goals are obtainable. My brothers, Troy and Eric, helped shape me into the person I am today. Our many ponderings about life and death, and everything in between ripened my curiosity about this strange, lovely world we live in.
My dear friends – Nicole, Susan, Tierra, Shamaine, and Carla. Thanks for being you. It is truly a privilege to know and learn from you.

Finally, thanks to my sweet girl, Cora. As one of my favorite poets, Mary Oliver, says,

“Because of the dog’s joyfulness, our own is increased. It is no small gift. It is not the least reason why we should honor as well as love the dog of our own life, and the dog down the street, and all the dogs not yet born. What would the world be like without music or rivers or the green and tender grass? What would this world be like without dogs?”

I wonder what writing this dissertation would have been like without Cora. I doubt it would have been nearly as enjoyable. She cozied up next to me, wherever I was writing, and encouraged much-needed breaks!
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Prologue

I admit that I had to deeply reflect in order to articulate exactly what fuels my interest in this research topic. I have asked myself many times – Why do I feel so committed to advocating for LGBTQ++ rights? Honestly, I feel so inextricably linked to this movement, it’s as if it were an extension of myself. I suppose that in some ways, maybe it is. I’ve always felt sincerely troubled upon observing or hearing of another human being suffering because I do believe that we are all connected – that we are the same, but we are different and these differences should be wholeheartedly celebrated. I simply wish for all living beings to be treated with kindness and respect and if I could eradicate all forms of injustice, I would.

As a former elementary school counselor, I developed an inquisitiveness about how we may successfully advocate for all students, especially marginalized students. I wondered what effective activism looked like among school counselors. I wondered how to navigate resistance, how to talk about sexual orientation and gender identity at the elementary level, and how to develop skills that would allow me to truly be an agent of change. I wondered about so many things related to being an activist school counselor committed to human rights that I decided to pursue my doctoral degree. My overarching goals have always been to contribute to the literature on LGBTQ++ issues in schools and to someday educate future counselors who may be wondering the same things.

With this being said, I am enthusiastic about this study and the impact it may have within the counseling field and beyond. I bring to the table my conceptual and
applied knowledge of school counselor activism and LGBTQ++ mental health. I also own my non-objective perspective, as I reject any notion of research being entirely neutral. I believe in the importance of activism, I have witnessed the detrimental effects of pervasive discrimination against marginalized groups, and I have been shattered upon hearing the news of anti-LGBTQ violence. Unfortunately, these injustices feel all too relevant because I am finishing this dissertation in the aftermath of the 2016 Orlando nightclub shootings\(^1\). Our current political and social atmosphere in the United States feels thick with the urgency to do more, say more, and act more so that we may heal from such violence and advance human equality. Thus, I situate my feelings, experiences, and worldviews within this study. Operating within a social justice framework, I also acknowledge the impact that my white, heterosexual, cisgender identities have on informing the research.

**LGBTQ++ Activism and School Counseling**

School counselors have the potential to make resounding positive impacts with the diverse populations they serve. They help maintain safe school climates in their many roles as leaders, facilitators, and agents of changes. School counselors have and do engage in activist work with diverse populations (ASCA, 2016). One particular group of students in which the school counselor advocates for is the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other noncisgender and sexual minority (LGBTQ++)

\(^1\) On June 12\(^{th}\), 2016, a gunman entered one of the best-known gay nightclubs in Orlando, Florida where he killed 49 people and injured 53 others. At the time of this writing, this event is the deadliest mass public shooting in modern U.S. history (Zambelich & Hurt, 2016).
community. Since the mid-1900's, mental health professionals and researchers devoted their time and efforts to remove homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, 2009; Glassgold, 2008). More recently, governing bodies and organizations related to the school counseling profession have communicated their stance and dedication to supporting the health and well-being of individuals who identify as LGBTQ++. The American School Counselor Association’s (ASCA) Ethical Standards (2010) and position statement (2014) on LGBT students call for school counselors to promote respect and equality for all individuals regardless of their gender identity/expression or sexual orientation. It is a school counselor’s responsibility to help eliminate barriers that inhibit student achievement and development.

The American Counseling Association (ACA) includes a division specific to LGBT rights. This division, the Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC) has published competencies related to counseling lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, intersex, and ally (LGBTQQIA) individuals; these competencies aim “to provide a framework for creating safe, supportive, and caring relationships with LGBTQQIA individuals, groups, and communities that foster self-acceptance and personal, social, emotional, and relational development” (ALGBTIC

2 There are sources cited throughout this dissertation that only use LGB or LGBT and thus will remain in their original acronym. The author of this dissertation chose to include the Q++ in an effort to include those who identify as queer and/or any other variation of sexual minority and gender expansive identities; the “++” also includes those who choose not to be labeled.
The ACA Competencies for Counseling with Transgender Clients, were developed to align with the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards and approved by ALGBTIC (ACA, 2010). The CACREP (2009) standards support the deliverance of competent and ethical counseling training and supervision. These competencies encourage counselors to move past the minimum standard of competence and become “conscientious consumers of the standards by becoming social change agents and allies for transgender clients” (ACA, 2010, p. 140).

Despite these professional mandates, it is no secret that LGBT students often encounter oppression and discrimination as a result of their gender identity or sexual orientation, and that their mental health and well-being may suffer as well (Kosciw et al., 2014; Troutman & Packers-Williams, 2014). Studies have shown that LGBT individuals are at an increased risk for depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse (Cochran, Sullivan, & Mays, 2003; Cochran et al., 2007; Irwin et al., 2014; Meyer & Frost, 2013). Researchers have also demonstrated a connection between stigma and the existence of such mental health difficulties (Meyer & Frost, 2013; Meyer, 2003; Meyer, 2007). Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003, 2007) purports that experiencing or even fearing stigma may lead to feelings of distress that can have detrimental effects on personal well-being. This stigma is born in policies and practices that exclude or discriminate. Recent scholarship has shown that LGBT students are more likely to feel unsafe and unwelcome at schools than their non-LGBT peers (ASCA, 2014; Kosciw, 2014).
School counselors realize these risk factors and can help advocate for oppressed and stigmatized youth within their school systems or at a larger societal level. Their work within and across multiple settings such as community service agencies, schools, private practice, and healthcare systems allows them to be of service to individuals of all ages, socioeconomic statuses, orientations, abilities, and other statuses. For example, they can advocate for equal educational and extracurricular opportunities, promote policies that ban harassment and bullying, provide a safe space for LGBT students to go to during the school day, encourage staff training on LGBT affirmative practices, and promote an inclusive curriculum (ASCA, 2014).

**Statement of Purpose**

While there is a growing amount of literature on the ways in which counselors translate social justice into action, there is a lack of attention to school counselor activism with LGBTQ++ students. More so, the majority of scholarly work on school counselor advocacy is conceptual. Specific areas that warrant empirical attention include the activist identity development of school counselors and their experiences in advocating for and with LGBTQ++ youth. This study is also innovative in design as it incorporates an arts-based narrative inquiry methodology that will make findings more widely accessible to audiences beyond academia.

**Research Questions**

Through this qualitative study I examined the activist identity development of school counselors who advocate for and with LGBTQ++ students, in order to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences around this work. Particular attention was given to what motivates and sustains their advocacy efforts as well as what personal
and professional experiences have shaped this process. The research questions that guided this study were aimed at understanding the experiences that contribute to each school counselor’s activist identity, how school counselors employ activism efforts within the realm of school counseling, and how their activist identity is integrated into their professional school counselor identity.

Research Questions are:

1. What is salient in shaping the participants' activist identities with regard to the LGBTQ++ community?
2. In what ways are school counselors activists for and with LGBTQ++ students?
3. What motivates and sustains school counselors’ social justice efforts?

**Significance of Study**

Advocacy in the work of a counselor is not meant to be an add-on to their work or an afterthought. Instead, advocacy work should be a “natural continuation of the counseling process” (Lewis et al., 2011, p. 206). Through exploring the experiences and identity development of school counselors who are activists for LGBTQ++ students, this study aims to increase knowledge and understanding of what school counselor activism looks like with LGBTQ++ students and to learn of the experiences of school counselors who have served as activists. Another aim is to deepen our understanding of experiences that shape activist identity among school counselors.

The potential impacts of this study include gaining information that may help inform counselor education programs, thus improving school counseling practice. Understanding what factors influence and facilitate advocacy with LGBTQ++ students can help counselor educators implement effective curricula and models into graduate
programs. The long-term benefits of this research go beyond academia. The arts-based narrative inquiry approach used to collect and analyze data is meant to make findings more accessible to various populations. School counselors, LGBTQ++ youth and families, and policy makers may also use this data to promote fairness for all individuals regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, and socioeconomic status. As the counseling profession undergoes a paradigm shift that includes social justice counseling as the fifth force following the psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, existential-humanistic, and multicultural forces (MacLeod, 2013; Ratts, 2009; Ratts, D'Andrea, & Arredondo, 2004), the findings from this study are meant to support an amendment to antiquated understandings of the counselor's role and identity (Ratts, 2009). Other helping professions will also benefit from knowledge generated from this study by learning about the trajectory of an activist and how one integrates this role into their other professional helping roles.

**Definition of Terms**

Defining key terms used throughout this study is warranted in order to avoid confusion and to ensure clarity. Terms defined in this section include: social justice, activism and advocacy, LGBTQ++, and arts-based research.

*Social justice* - Notions of social justice are often found within the counseling profession, as counselors are called to act as agents of change. In their Code of Ethics, the American Counseling Association (ACA) defines social justice as, “the promotion of equity for all people and groups for the purpose of ending oppression and injustice affecting clients, students, counselors, families, communities, schools, workplaces, governments, and other social and institutional systems” (2014, p. 21).
Activism and advocacy - With a social justice influence, Marshall and Anderson (2009) frame activism as being, “aimed at increasing inclusivity, fairness, empowerment, and equity and fairness, especially for heretofore oppressed and silenced groups” (Marshall & Anderson, 2009, p. 18). Marshall and Anderson (2009) define an activist as, “an individual who is known for taking stands and engaging in action aimed at producing social change, possibly in conflict with institutional opponents” (p. 18). While there are differing definitions of what it means to be an advocate or an activist, activism is understood as actively confronting and working to dismantle the current system, in order to bring into being a better, more fair system (Chang et al., 2010; Speer, 2008) while advocacy can be understood as influencing change or securing resources (Speer, 2008). Advocacy can be further understood as the belief that individual and collection actions are necessary to combat injustices and improve conditions in order to benefit individuals and groups (House & Martin, 1998). There is expected overlap between these two concepts and some studies that are cited use the term “advocacy”, thus both are used in this writing.

LGBTQ++ - LGBTQ++ is used to denote the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community. LGBT is most commonly used as an umbrella term because of the commonalities among each group; however, it is important to recognize that distinct and separate populations are represented by “L”, “G”, “B”, “T”, and “Q”. “LGB” refers to sexual orientation, “T” refers to gender identity/expression, and “Q” represents individuals who identify as queer in their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Transgender is used as an umbrella term to describe people whose gender identity is different from what they were assigned at birth and/or whose gender
identity does not conform to societal norms (Gay-Straight Alliance Network/Tides Center, Transgender Law Center & National Center for Lesbian Rights, 2004). The ++ symbols represent all other sexual minority and gender expansive identities. Each of these groups is a diverse set of individuals whose members vary in demographic characteristics and in their own concerns and needs (Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health Issues and Research Gaps and Opportunities, 2011). The needs of transgender students often differs from LGB students, yet there is overlap in the shared experience of not conforming to gender norms (DePaul et al., 2009). At times, research that focused solely on LGB individuals is cited and the acronym LGB will be used appropriately.

*Arts-based research* - Arts-based research (ABR) is often used as an umbrella term to describe research guided by aesthetic features (Barone & Eisner, 2012). Arts-based research practices are defined as, “a set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation” (Leavy, 2009, p. 2). As differing perspectives on how to incorporate the arts into research grows, many other distinctions have been developed, such as a/r/tography, arts-informed inquiry, aesthetically based research, research based art, and practice-based research (Osei-Kofi, 2013). For the purpose of this study, arts-based research was used as an all encompassing term that describes artistic approaches used at all stages of the qualitative inquiry.

*Education and training* - It is important to discern the differences between the terms *education* and *training* as they are used in this study. Burrus (2015) writes that
you educate people for understanding and you train people for performance. Education is learning to see the whole picture of why and how things work together; it is concept-based. Training is task-oriented and skill-based; this focus on obtaining skills does not provide the depth required for creative problem solving. Burrus uses an example of someone being trained versus educated on working with Excel. An individual may be trained to create a graphic in Excel and they will do it well; however, they will have problems working with the other functionalities of Excel. A person who is educated about Excel's full capabilities will understand the concepts that underlie all of Excel’s functions and will thus be able to apply this knowledge, along with creativity, to find solutions to problems not encountered before within Excel.

The terms education and training are both used within Counselor Education and this study, although I reason that when it comes activism, education should be at the forefront. With education, the potential for major breakthroughs are more likely (Burrus, 2015). This isn’t to say that counselor educators should not also focus on skills; however, counselor students need to learn about the importance, significance, and history of activism so they may full understand the why and how of being an activist. When counselor educators take a holistic approach to teaching, they will provide students with both knowledge and tools, enabling students to work with problems through an informed, creative, and innovative lens.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, I discuss various scholarly studies related to school counselor advocacy efforts and education, as well as the general experiences of LGBTQ++ students in K-12 schools. Prior to examining the literature, I discuss my theoretical framework guiding the study. This review is divided into the following sections: critical social theory as the theoretical framework, the history of school counseling, advocacy frameworks, school counselor advocacy, school experiences of K-12 LGBTQ++ students, and a synthesis of the literature as it relates to my study.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Social Theory

In order to understand critical social theory, one must also understand social justice. Social justice can be described as both a goal and a process (Bell, 2007). It involves actions that are “democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change” (Bell, 2007, p. 1). The goal of social justice is for “equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs... in which distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure” (Bell, 2007, p.1). Critical social theory embraces the same vision as social justice, as critical social theory is, at its core, committed to improving the human condition.

Critical social theory was formulated by Jurgen Habermas and influenced by earlier work in critical theory from members of the Frankfurt School, specifically Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse (Ngyenwama, 2002). This theory takes into account the construction of social forms of life by individuals and the possibility of their reconstruction. A core tenet of critical social theory is its occupation
with challenging the status quo and adequately addressing human desires. It is focused on the emancipation of individuals and finding alternatives to existing social conditions (Ngwenyama, 2002). Another core facet of critical social theory is how those in power dominate and marginalize some groups of people, the way in which power becomes a part of every aspect of life, and the notion of power in each person (Foucault, 1980).

People who are oppressed may internalize their repression and even come to accept it. Acknowledging this can be quite difficult because it is so ingrained in our ways of knowing, thinking, interacting, and speaking (Foucault, 1980).

The overarching goal of critical social theory is to advance the “emancipatory function of knowledge” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 1). This is accomplished by promoting criticism, particularly the function of criticism in oppression and emancipation. Critical social theory in education underscores the influence that social systems and people have on one another, and discerns how both may be emancipated (Leonardo).

According to Ngwenyama (2002), a critical social theory approach is based on five assumptions: People have the power to change their world, as they are the creators of it. Secondly, scientific knowledge about the world is socially constructed, thus all knowledge of the world is infused with values. Third, critique and reasons cannot be separated. Reason here is thought of as reconciling knowledge with change in order to liberate humans and it is through critical reason that social affairs can be understood and reconstructed. Fourth, practice and theory are interconnected because critical social theory aims to merge knowledge and satisfaction of human need for self improvement. The fifth assumption is that critical social theory is reflexive; those who
follow this approach should collaborate with the individuals who will be impacted by the knowledge and change it produces.

Those who identify as activists may witness attitudes or events that appear unjust or unequal and then seek out ways to affect change for the betterment. Sometimes this will lead to a movement that demands direct action or risk-taking at the expense of the activist. Voice (2011) writes that injustice can only be challenged if we can communicate why a situation is unjust and how we might move towards justice. Seeing the world through a lens of fairness enables us to see the inequality that many human beings experience.

Critical social theory involves a transformational agenda, both in the process and outcome. It coalesces various beliefs about the nature of change, human understanding and misunderstanding, and the role of education and criticism in society (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010). For example, school counselors who identify as activists see what is oppressive and then act to motivate positive change to end oppressive policies and practices. In this sense, critical social theory is appropriate as a lens. Critical social theorists see the inequalities and injustices that are present in their everyday relationships, and seek to transform them. This theory holds that these injustices stem from systems that produce knowledge in such a way that their oppressive effects are hidden over time within deeply embedded cultural practices (Dant, 2003).

Critical social science views humans as active beings who use their own self-interpretation to create themselves. Members of the Frankfurt School believed that explanations should consider context and that social systems are oppressive (Fay, 1987). They also contended that individuals use their knowledge to change and redirect
a course of events. This theory offers a framework that challenges the ideological underpinnings of everyday practices that oppress and helps those seeking to eradicate or amend such practices develop new ways of conceiving meaning and purpose in society. Several tenets of critical social theory can be applied within this study. Activists employ efforts to transform their communities into more harmonious ones with the goal of creating positive and lasting change. Activists are moved to change the situation, to stand for something, and to fight for something when this injustice is felt, experienced, or observed.

A salient term here is the idea of critical consciousness. Freire (1993) defines critical consciousness as the capacity for critical reflection of social forces that propagate inequality and the action it takes to change them. Freire considered the relationship between reflection and action as reciprocal. Before critical action, critical reflection must occur, as people do not act to change oppressive conditions without some awareness that the conditions are unjust. He surmised that as people recognized oppression, they would feel compelled to change the unjust conditions and act accordingly. As persons act to change these social conditions, they would also gain a deeper understanding of the structural oppression. Thus, the relationship is reciprocal in that as reflection happens, critical action follows and vice versa (Watts, Deimer, & Voight, 2010).

Watts, Deimer, and Voight (2010) view critical consciousness as consisting of three main components: critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action. Critical reflection involves an analysis of the structural causes of social disparities and also emphasizes the root causes of these social inequalities. Political efficacy refers to
individual's beliefs about their capacity to effect social and political change through collective and/or individual activism. In a similar vein, Kieffer (1984) purports that one's perceived capacity to effect change, known here as “participatory competence” is a vital predecessor to activism behavior. People who believe in their ability to initiate change will be more likely to partake in critical action. The third component, critical action, is the individual or collective action taken to change unjust aspects of society, such as policies and practices. Social problems are framed as systemic issues. Critical action is usually quantitatively measured in research by looking at the frequency and intentions behind participation in social action. More research devoted to the subjective meanings behind individuals' social and political action is needed (Watts, Deimer, & Voight, 2010), thus this particular study is warranted.

As an oppressed group, there are times when these injustices come in the form of harassment, discrimination, and violence against individuals who identify as sexual and gender identity minorities, as LGBTQ++ youth and families are often victims of harassment, discrimination, violence, and oppression. Many counselors have worked with and on behalf of minority groups, combating oppression and participating in activism. For example, school counselors have helped implement gay-straight alliances (GSAs), which are student-led, non-curricular groups that provide a safe, supportive outlet for LGBTQ++ students and allies. In supporting such groups, school counselors help to reduce harmful psychosocial outcomes facing LGBTQ++ youth and create a more positive school climate for all students (Bidell, 2011). In a study examining intervention strategies among middle school counselors who have confronted situations in which
LGBTQ students were being bullied or harassed, DeMauro (2009) found that 100% of the counselors surveyed (n=93) reported that they addressed these behaviors directly.

School counselors may use the lens of critical social theory to identify how their schools present as safe or unsafe for LGBTQ++ students. Using a critical social theory approach in support of school counseling efforts that promote safe schools is necessitated given the anti-LGBTQ++ harassment, discrimination, and abuse that occurs in U.S. schools (Smith, 2013). The emancipatory agenda of critical social theory is particularly relevant for school counselors who wish to deconstruct heterosexism and promote more equitable school environments. Moreover, critical social theory can help institutions to detect and undo the ways in which they may be advancing oppression of certain groups. This can apply to the schools in which counselors work and the academic programs in which they are trained.

**History of School Counseling**

As the United States began to undergo a period of urbanization and industrialization at the turn of the 20th century, many proponents of social reform and educators expressed concern for vocational guidance. The first guidance curriculums were introduced into English classes in 1889 by a school principal in Detroit. Teachers were often assigned the duties of vocational counselors, even though they received no additional pay and were not formally trained for such tasks (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). By the 1930s, this vocational guidance included academic and educational guidance, with an emphasis on testing, yet counseling was merely thought of as a tool to help in the guidance program (Aubrey, 1992; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). As the lack of structure around training and counseling programs was realized, educational reform
and social/political events unfolded to influence the nature of guidance and counseling in schools.

The Education Act of 1946 and the National Defense Education Act of 1958 helped establish school counseling programs while the birth of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) in 1952 led credibility to school counseling as a profession (Bauman et al., 2003; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). Around the same time ASCA was formulated, the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA), predecessor to the American Counseling Association (ACA) was also established (Bauman et al., 2003).

By 1958, Sputnick was launched by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the newly recognized profession of counseling received funding from the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) to expand school testing programs and training for school counselors. This funding from NDEA was in part due to fears that other countries were exceeding the United States in the fields of math and sciences. Hoping that more students would go into the sciences, more funding was provided for education, including guidance and counseling. As result, the number of school counselors increased from 6,780 in 1951 to more than 30,000 in 1965 (Poppen & Thompson, 1974). The focus on vocational preparation remained and these school counselors primarily served as gatekeepers in determining which students would be prepared for a college education (Herr, 2002). Further support for guidance and counseling came with the mass trepidation for human and civil rights in the 1960s and Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in the 1970s (Bauman et al., 2003).
The call for putting comprehensive and developmental guidance programs into schools began to gain momentum in the 1970s, continued throughout the 1980s, and into the 1990s. Comprehensive and developmental approaches supported the notion that college was a viable option for all students and counseling programs are warranted at all school levels, elementary through high school (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). Multiple sources played a role in this call for reorientation, including interest in career development and developmental counseling as well as concerns about evaluation and the efficacy of current approaches. Redefining the role of the professional school counselor was warranted as the expectations and demands of school counselors shifted to include advocacy efforts and leadership in school reform (Chibbaro, 2006).

Moreover, school settings became and continue to become increasingly diverse, making it important for school counselors to address various cultural dimensions. Green and Keys (2001) purport that advocacy is essential to the school counselor’s role as counselors are just as focused on creating change within the classroom, school, family, and neighborhoods as they are with the individual.

Frameworks for Advocacy

One particular area of influence was the introduction of a multicultural perspective in counseling. The Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) approved a document put forth by the Professional Standards Committee that outlined the need and rationale for multicultural standards in the counseling profession (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). The competencies expressed in the report primarily addressed four groups: African American, American Indian, Asian American, and Hispanics/Latinos. There are opposing thoughts on the term
multicultural, as some see it as exclusive to other minority groups. Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1992), however, argue that the term multicultural lends itself to consider other minorities as well. This report and the oncoming implementation of these competencies served as a catalyst for more school counselors being employed by schools and serving as advocates and leaders.

The Transforming School Counseling Initiative, a subgroup of The Education Trust (1997) collaborated with the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) to infuse this new vision of school counselors implementing skills of leadership, advocacy, teamwork, use of data, and commitment to student achievement into the American School Counselor Association National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs (ASCA, 2003; 2005). This collaboration substantiated the role of school counselors as social justice advocates within their schools (Dahir & Stone, 2009).

The National Center for Transforming School Counseling (NCTSC) proposes that school counselors are leaders and advocates for social justice; they should ensure educational equality for all students, including those who are underserved by the system. Students and families who have been historically marginalized have a greater need for committed school advocates, more so than their advantaged peers (Education Trust, 2009). NCTSC (2009) emphasizes that school counselors commit to ensuring every student, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, receives a school experience that will increase their success and potential, thus positively impacting their quality of life.

The ASCA National Model is based on leadership, advocacy, and collaboration and shares the same basic principles of NCTSC (ASCA, 2012; Dixon, Tucker, & Clark,
An important belief of the ASCA National Model for School Counseling Programs is that school counselors work with other stakeholders to meet the needs of all students and create systemic change when necessary (Dixon, Tucker, & Clark, 2010). As society has become increasingly inclusive and sensitive to diversity, standards of accreditation have been implemented into counselor education programs.

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) has offered specific training standards for counselor education programs since its establishment in 1981 (Troutman & Packer-Williams, 2014). Similar to ASCA and NCTSC, CACREP revised its 2001 standards in 2009 to include more specific areas of social justice and advocacy. An added section on diversity and advocacy calls for school counselors to be educated as individuals who enhance institutional, environmental, and community opportunities, as well as challenge barriers that hinder the personal, social, career, and academic development of students.

CACREP’s 2009 Standards also emphasized that school counselors provide services that foster a positive school climate that is equitable to all multicultural student populations (CACREP, 2009). CACREP defines multicultural as a “term denoting the diversity of racial, ethnic, and cultural heritage; socioeconomic status; age; gender; sexual orientation and religious and spiritual beliefs, as well as physical, emotional, and mental abilities” (CACREP, 2009, p. 60). While this definition fails to include gender expression and identity, it has come a long way from when the term simply referred to individuals of color. Multiculturalism is the fourth force in counseling, following psychodynamic, behaviorist, and humanistic schools of thought. Even more recently,
social justice counseling is viewed as the fifth force in counseling (Ratts, D’Andrea, & Arrendondo, 2004).

There has been much encouragement for professional school counselors to take an activist stance within schools and become agents of social justice (Bidell, 2011; Bemak & Chung, 2008; Bemak & Chung, 2005; Dixon, Tucker, & Clark, 2010; Erhard & Sinai, 2012; Ratts, DeKruyf, Chen-Hayes, 2007); however, there is a paucity of research within the counselor education literature that speaks to ways in which counselors are acting as change agents. Some counselors embrace a role of advocate or activist, while others resist the call from professional organizations to become change agents with the client as well as on behalf of the client (Lewis, Toporek, & Ratts, 2010). Scholars have noted concerns with the various and, at times, differing scope of social justice advocacy among counselors (Roysircar, 2009; Weinrach & Thomas, 2004). To address this phenomenon, frameworks such as the American Counseling Association (ACA) Advocacy Competencies, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model, and the Multicultural Counseling Competencies have integrated social justice advocacy to help identify a more complete picture of the skills, attitudes, practices, and knowledge that counselors may use to initiate change (Moe et al., 2010).

The ACA Advocacy Competencies provide a useful framework for how counselors can become and remain agents of social change (Lewis et al. 2002; Ratts & Hutchins, 2004). Ratts and Hutchins (2009) outline several strategies that counselors may employ for infusing the advocacy competencies into practice. This approach proposes the use of activism and social justice as a manner through which to address the unfair political, social, and economic conditions that obstruct the personal/social,
career, and academic development of individuals, families, and society (Ratts, 2009; Lewis et al., 2002). The premise is that sometimes it is the system that needs changing, not the individual. Individual counseling that minimizes the influence of the social environment can be limited (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009; Goodman et al., 2004). Hardiman and Jackson (1982) maintain that oppression is manifested at the individual, social/cultural, and institutional levels. For example, at the individual level we see stereotypes and prejudice, societal norms are present at the social/cultural level, and rules and policies exist within, but not solely, at the institutional level.

The counseling profession has advanced to the point where counselors are viewed as having “a responsibility to make the environment more conducive to positive human development” (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009, p. 260). This puts counselors in a position to become change agents who challenge barriers to optimal development, as they have access to various levels. In this vein, counseling can be viewed as a political endeavor as counselors put forth interventions that help to change unjust systems so that they are more equitable for individuals and communities who have been marginalized.

Lasting change cannot happen until counselors think at a systemic level and encourage equilibrium within a school, community, or society (Lopez-Baez & Paylo, 2009). This focus on initiating change within a social/political domain is particularly salient as research highlights the relationship between power, privilege, and oppression and the role of wellness in promoting liberation and resisting oppression (Prilleltensky, 2008). Prilleltensky (2008) writes of the importance of allocating resources and intervening in the sociopolitical domain, where power can either obstruct or meet
needs, thus intricately concerning wellness with justice. It is at this level that counselors can communicate with key stakeholders and use their unique knowledge and insight to advocate for those who are oppressed. Counselors can intervene by becoming an ally to others or by becoming a leader in the movement for desired change (Lopez-Baez & Paylo, 2009). The struggle for equal rights among sexual minority and gender expansive individuals is just one example of inequality. Counselors have both a professional and personal stake in freeing individuals from oppression and helping to promote the development of a more just society (Lee, 2007).

The professional standards put forth by organizations such as NCTSC, ASCA, CACREP, and ACA come at a time when school counselors are expected to help eliminate traditional barriers that are impeding students’ success and well-being, rather than increasing. This increase in attention has propelled researchers to study how counselors are advocating for a socially just school climate, where all K-12 students are treated with respect and receive equal opportunities. Scholarly studies, however, remain limited in offering knowledge on how and why school counselors implement social justice frameworks into their practices. More studies assessing the ways in which such frameworks exist in school counseling are warranted.

**School Counselor Advocacy Development**

The scope of research dedicated to school counselor advocacy is scarce, with most studies on the topic being conceptual (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Bemak & Chung, 2005; Bemak & Chung, 2008; Dixon, Tucker, & Clark, 2010; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). The limited literature within school counseling that does exist at the time of this writing largely focuses on advocacy efforts at the high school level and school
counselors’ perceived traits of social justice advocates. Related to activist identity
development among counselors, there was one study found that explored how school
counselors use their “personhood” as an advocate for social justice (McMahon et al.,
2010). Citing the support for use of self (authentic emotions, beliefs, experiences, and
personalities rather than only skills and knowledge) as an important tool for change
that counselors have, McMahon et al., used a grounded theory approach to explore the
personhood of 16 counselors in relation to racial, feminist, and advocacy development.

Findings from this study highlight three elements critical to school counselors’
advocacy work: (a) racial identity, (b) self-reflection, and (c) feminist principles.
Participants in this study described that they partake in ongoing and active self-
reflection of their power and privilege status. While none of the participants identified
as feminist, they did incorporate core values of feminism in their advocacy work. In the
process of promoting change, personhood (personality, experiences, beliefs, emotions)
was also found to be critical to advocacy. For example, the ability to take risks was a
prominent characteristic expressed by participants. They also shared a deep emotional
connection to their role as advocates and emphasized being influenced by experiences
with others engaged in social justice. Many implications for training school counselors
to be effective advocates can be derived from this study. Notably, training programs
may consider how to implement feminist principles, coursework that informs on ways
to confront oppression and challenge inequalities in school systems, mentorship from
other social justice advocates, and training on burnout prevention strategies (McMahon
et al., 2010).
Young, Dollarhide, and Baughman (2015) conducted a qualitative study in which the research team analyzed an open-ended statement from a national survey of 1,316 school counselors and school counselor supervisors on leadership. Their findings highlight 5 characteristics that participants believed were essential to school counselor leadership: Leadership Attributes, Relationship Attributes, Communication and Collaboration, Exemplary Program Design, and Advocacy. Advocacy was the final theme with a 7% response rate and derived from descriptors such as “change agent”, “advocate/advocacy”, and “diversity, equity, and justice”. These findings align with the four themes of the ASCA National Model of Leadership, Advocacy, Collaboration, and Systemic Change; however, it is important to note that participants are all members of ASCA and thus are not representative of school counselors who are not members nor are they representative of all ASCA members. Counselor educators may consider these themes in program development and nurture such characteristics. The low response rate for “advocacy” is especially pertinent in the context of this study as I seek to better understand how school counselors situate activism within their professional school counselor identity (Young, Dollarhide, & Baughman, 2015).

These findings are of interest because of their relevance to counselor education programs. Little is known about the relationship between counselor competence in advocacy, advocacy training in counselor education, and the likelihood of counselor students and counselor educators to advocate. Further, the need for more comprehensive and thorough school counselor education related to the needs of LGBT students is often referenced (DePaul et al., 2009; Luke et al., 2011).
School Counselor Advocacy Education

Scholars continue to identify the need and desire for greater attention to social justice advocacy in counselor education programs yet there is also some evidence that practitioners and counseling students have mixed feelings about addressing issues of oppression and privilege in their role as counselor (Bemak & Chung, 2008; Hays et al., 2007). Bemak and Chung (2008) explore resistance among school counselors who refuse to exercise roles as social justice leaders and change agents. Numerous factors are discussed yet they proclaim “nice counselor syndrome” (NCS; Chung, 2006) as one overarching variable. Many school counselors strongly desire to be perceived as people who promote peace, acceptance, and harmony. While they do believe in educational equality for all students, especially in regard for students who are marginalized, school counselors who develop NCS refuse to participate in anything that may be viewed as controversial or challenging by others in their school community (Bemak & Chung, 2008).

This study lends itself to the issue of training around concepts of privilege and oppression. Counselors who refuse to advocate or participate in professional changes deemed necessary to stimulate positive educational outcomes may actually perpetuate oppressive structures by avoiding disagreement and conflicts. Bemak and Chung purport that effective social change may require school counselors to move beyond NCS in order to address inequality and initiate social justice services, even though these actions may be viewed as controversial by other school personnel.

Students in graduate counseling programs would benefit from learning the competencies and skills needed in order to navigate complex problems related to social
justice in their work settings. My study illuminates personal and professional characteristics of school counselors who are effective agents of change and the ways in which systemic barriers to equality may be addressed.

Hays, Dean, and Chang (2007) conducted a qualitative analysis of how 16 counselors conceptualized issues of privilege and oppression in counseling sessions and how they perceived their education regarding these concepts. Data collected and analyzed from semi-structured interviews and focus groups yielded two major themes. The first theme was a connection between the counselors’ perceptions of the degree of cultural power held by clients and clients’ cultural identities; and the second theme acknowledges that counselors felt underprepared to address issues of power in counseling.

Participants mentioned the effect that different levels of cultural power have on the counseling relationship, how they respond to diverse clients, and how these interactions make them aware of oppression and privilege. Participants reported that while they welcomed conversations about oppression with clients, there was little discussion of social advocacy. With clients of privilege, participants struggled to bring up with clients instances in which the clients displayed discriminatory behaviors or attitudes. Counselors who participated in this study noted that social justice advocacy issues were not addressed in their coursework. Hays et al., (2007) recommend counselor educators address counselor self-efficacy and use a contextual approach during areas of training. For example, a case conceptualization may be used so that counselor trainees can gain a systemic view of oppression and points of intervention.
Another study by Dillon et al. (2004) examined the ways in which counselor educators may advance the development of LGB-affirmative behaviors and attitudes among counselor trainees. A voluntary research team of 10 mental health counseling graduate students participated in two hour-long weekly seminars and group discussions for one year. Using consensual qualitative research (CQR) and written reflective narratives regarding their developmental experiences, the research team described collective and individual themes that emerged in the process of training LGB-affirmative counselors. Specifically, researchers investigated the attitudes of heterosexual mental health counseling graduate students towards sexual minorities.

Data analysis revealed 10 core domains that emerged among team members: (a) socialization, (b) motivation for participation, (c) homophobic self-consciousness, (d) research team atmosphere, (e) preconceptions regarding sexual identity development, (f) outcomes gained from participation on research team, (g) critical events, (h) growth toward affirmativeness, (i) awareness of heterosexual privilege, (j) active commitment to continued self-exploration. Participants reflected on their personal socialization process regarding sexual orientation, homophobic fears about being perceived as LGB, and their awareness or lack of awareness about their own sexual identity development. The self-reflective process proved to be especially influential in participants’ journeys from having heterosexist and homophobic beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors to becoming LGB-affirmative professionals with future plans to continue this self-exploration. Guest speakers, supportive group members, and critical readings also facilitated the growth that incurred. Similarly, this dissertation research engages
participants in a process of self-reflection as they consider their activist identity
development within the context of school counseling.

**School Counselor Advocacy in Practice**

Grimes, Haskins, and Paisley (2013) conducted a phenomenological study in
which they interviewed seven rural school counselors who identify as social justice
advocates. Findings from their data highlight themes of personal integration, stability of
place, community promise, mutual reliance, and a focus on individuals (Grimes et al.,
2014). The authors argue that a social justice advocacy approach is warranted as the
needs of school students grow. When asked about traits necessary to be successful as an
advocate, each counselor discussed the importance of integrating their personal and
professional selves because counselors may have to consider their reputations,
especially in rural areas. Participants also emphasized the importance of building
relationships in the community because of the connections they gain in order to meet
student needs in nontraditional ways. Findings indicated that addressing social justice
within a social/political domain in a rural area often begins with the development of
relationships with political leaders in the neighborhood (Grimes et al., 2013).

Counselor students, as well as current practitioners, may benefit from learning
about ways to create partnerships with community members in order to meet the
needs of marginalized individuals. Limitations of this study include generalizability,
possible research bias, a small sample size (7) of all White participants, limited gender
representation (6 participants were female while 1 was a male), and concern about
transferability of results as all of the participants were from one region in the United
States, thus it is possible that their views are due to their shared culture.
Singh, Urbano, Haston, and McMahon (2010) used a grounded theory approach to study the ways in which 16 school counselors who identify as social justice agents advocate for change within their schools. The question guiding their study was, “What advocacy strategies do school counselors who self-identify as social justice advocates use to enact change within their school communities?” (Singh et al., 2010, p. 136).

Participants were 12 females and 4 males, ranging in age from 27-56 years of age. Six counselors worked in public elementary schools, 2 were employed at public middle schools, 1 was employed in a private middle school, and 7 of the counselors worked in public high schools. Interview questions focused on the counselors’ experiences in initiating change and the strategies they implemented as social justice advocates. Seven overall strategies that counselors used emerged from the data analysis. These strategies were: (a) educating others about their role as an advocate; (b) initiating difficult conversations; (c) teaching students skills related to self-advocacy; (d) using data for marketing purposes; (e) forming intentional alliances; (f) knowing how and when to intervene; and (g) consciousness raising. The latter two are strategies used throughout the process while the others are used in certain situations and/or at specific stages of the advocacy process.

Each counselor reported that affecting change within the school system is a political process and that social change may be less likely to happen if they were to remain neutral. Furthermore, participants communicated that there were times when their advocacy efforts put them in an unpopular position. This is similar to Grimes et al.’s (2013) study of rural school counselors who had their reputations to consider. In regard to educating others about their role, participants described needing to educate
others about the nature of their social justice work, as there was often a misperception
of the counselor doing only traditional guidance counselor work such as scheduling and
testing. Role clarification and self-promotion are important skills for counselors to have
(Singh et al., 2010). This notion of marketing oneself aligns with earlier research that
highlights the need for counselors to learn marketing and public relations skills so that
they may successfully implement programs within their schools (Scarborough & Luke,
2008). Researcher bias and lack of generalizability were some of the limitations in this
study.

Field and Baker (2004) used a focus group methodology to conduct interviews of
9 high school counselors. The purpose of this study was to operationalize how school
counselors define advocacy and learn more about their beliefs and behaviors regarding
advocacy in their roles. Another intention of the researcher was to gain insight into the
process in which counselors learn advocacy. A semi-structured interview format was
used and each of the two focus groups met one time; this group format allowed
participants the opportunity to reflect on each others’ responses. Interview responses
were coded for themes using a constant comparative method.

Results showed that participants in this study defined advocacy as focusing on
students, going above and beyond for students, and employed specific advocacy
behaviors. The participants collectively reported that their advocacy behaviors involved
supporting and standing up for students, writing letters, making phone calls, enlisting
the help of other students who had the influence to make life better for all students, and
negotiating administration. These counselors also noted that being flexible and realistic
about their abilities to intervene are notable advocacy behaviors. They all believed that
the most important advocacy behaviors were being a voice for all students and exercising acceptance on behalf of the students.

A heavy workload and handling multiple tasks assigned by administration were cited as being barriers to fully acting as advocates. Also, personal inhibition on the part of the counselors may be a result of graduate programs and professional organizations failing to stimulate advocacy efforts among school counselors. Focus group participants did express graduate programs as an opportunity to learn advocacy behaviors; however, one cannot assume that each department provided thorough training or even shares the belief system that counselors should be educated as change agents (Field & Baker, 2004).

Field and Baker (2004) acknowledge that the behavioral themes in this study fall within a reactive school counseling framework, one in which the counselors react to a problematic issue that has already existed for some time. Current school counseling models and frameworks indicate the value in counselors taking a proactive stance in their advocacy work. Reactive and individualized advocacy behaviors may not effectively lead to lasting and systemic change (Lewis et al., 2002). Field notes that none of the behaviors communicated by the participants in this study focused on changing the systems that may be contributing to the students’ issues.

A study conducted by Parikh, Post, and Flowers (2011) focused on the relationship between school counselors’ attitudes of social justice advocacy and their beliefs about justice in the world. Using a nonexperimental correlational research design, the researchers aimed to understand how belief in a just world (BJW), political
ideology, socioeconomic status of origin, race, and religious ideology relate to social justice advocacy (SJA) attitudes among professional school counselors.

The researchers randomly selected 2,000 ASCA members to email requesting participation in the study. Through an online survey, the researchers collected responses from 298 participants. Their instruments included the Social Justice Advocacy Scale, the Global Belief in a Just World Scale, and a demographic questionnaire. A sequential multiple regression was used to analyze the data, which highlighted the unique variance that each variable contributed. “Political ideology” and “belief in a just world” were considered to be statistically significant variables. While the other variables were not found to be significant, the authors note that the sample itself was not very diverse, which could account for the lack of significance (the sample largely consisted of White, middle-class women). The finding that political ideology is linked to SJA attitudes supports previous research that counseling graduate students’ political beliefs and predispositions towards social justice may predict desire to engage in advocacy (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005). The counselors in this study, regardless of their socioeconomic status or race, reported a willingness to support and advocate for all of their students.

“Belief in a just world” (BJW) was found to be statistically significant; this finding suggests that those with low levels of BJW are more likely to have more positive attitudes towards SJA (Parikh, Post, & Flowers, 2005). Implications for training can be derived from this study. For example, it is important for counselors to examine how their SJA attitudes are influenced by personal beliefs. Parikh, Post, and Flowers recommend that counselor educators use the ACA Advocacy Competencies as a
framework to teach SJA. School counseling students should be prepared to integrate SJA into their daily practice. This can be encouraged by counselor educators as they infuse multiculturalism and social justice throughout the curriculum, require students to participate in cultural immersion experiences, and facilitate an environment that is open to discussions of political ideology, SJA, and cultural issues (Parikh, Post, & Flowers, 2005). The field of counseling has been working hard to promote advocacy and social justice advocacy efforts. These findings communicate a need for greater multicultural competency among school counselors and more instruction on how to incorporate social justice into their daily practice while navigating systems of oppression (Parikh, Post, & Flowers, 2005).

Another study focused on the perceptions of school counselors towards their roles as social justice advocates and education (Waters-Bilbo, 2010). Unique to this study was the evaluation of how Hart’s (2001, 2009) transformational education theory might influence the school counselor advocacy literature. The researcher here views education as one avenue to transformation and argues that school counselors have not been thoroughly educated to perform the role of social justice advocate. Using Q methodology, Waters-Bilbo sought out to study the subjective perceptions of school counselors. Q methodology uses arduous quantitative means to study human subjectivity; it is well suited for exploratory or theory-building research (Brown, 1980). Use of this methodology allowed the school counselors to construct their own meanings about their perceptions regarding social justice.

All participants in this study were school counselors in the United States. Participants were recruited at the 2009 ASCA conference, at a smaller Oklahoma
conference on counseling students living in poverty, and through a snowball technique in which the researcher contacted school counselors whom she knew and asked them to contact other counselors who they thought may be interested. Through these efforts, 38 school counselors from 12 states participated in the study. The counselors included 34 females and 4 males and worked at various K-12 levels.

The participants rank-ordered 36 statements based on Hart’s theory of transformative education. Data included demographic questionnaires, distinguishing statements, post interviews with selected participants, and interpretation of factor arrays. Using statistical procedures, four counselor viewpoints were determined: the Relational Diplomat, the Advocate for Change, the Practical Traditionalist, and the Congruent Pragmatist. The Relational Diplomat values their relationships with school personnel and employs empathy and positive regard to nurture these relationships. The Advocate for Change uses data to challenge the status quo, uses empathy and positive regard with students but not necessarily with others in the school community, and believes in the transformative power of the school counseling program. The Practical Traditionalist sees their mission as using data to help secondary students into post-secondary education and careers. The Congruent Pragmatist does not value the teaching role in the ASCA model and does not believe in transformative power as much; they see their role as providing information to students and they value the Rogerian principles of empathy, positive regard, and congruence. It was not clear from the data whether or not the Relational Diplomat and the Practical Traditionalist see their school counseling programs as having transformative power.
The Advocate for Change attitude is most closely aligned with the recommendations in the ASCA National Model and conforms to the model of transformational education. All of the viewpoints emphasized the influence of Rogerian’s therapeutic factors, as all of the counselors agreed on the saliency of the mental health model (Waters-Bilbo, 2010). Rogerian’s therapeutic factors can help establish relationships, which can be a necessary step towards advocating for social justice. Singh, Urbano, Haston, and McMahon (2010) reported that these qualities are important for school counselors to learn how to be effective change agents. The ASCA National Model does not as directly support these skills, however the findings from this study support that school counselors value skills that will help them develop relationships based on understanding and empathy (Waters-Bilbo, 2010).

While this study posed four viewpoints, these cannot be interpreted as being predictive of what makes a school counselor an effective social justice advocate. For example, the Advocate for Change attitude struggled with balancing harmonious relationships with the wider school community. Singh et al. (2010) suggests that school counselors engaging in advocacy efforts need to be politically savvy. The Relational Diplomat and the Congruent Pragmatist perspectives admitted that they have never received education on how to be an effective advocate, however there is not enough research to suggest that these viewpoints would be ineffective at advocating for social justice. The findings from this study certainly indicate that more research is necessary to illuminate what school counseling efforts have been effective at social justice advocacy (Waters-Bilbo, 2010).
School Experiences of K-12 LGBT Students

Recently, there has been an increase in attention to the school climate of LGBT youth, as their wellbeing is jeopardized by discrimination and violence. Recent studies (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; Kosciw et al., 2012; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005) have suggested that LGBT youth encounter hostile school environments compared to their heterosexual counterparts.

Dworkin and Yi (2003) reviewed statistical evidence of LGBT related violence all over the world. Statistical information from the United States came from Amnesty International and the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-violence Project. Dworkin and Yi pointed out trends of anti-LGBT violence and the negative psychological impact that acts of violence have on LGBT persons (2003). They urge for more thorough education of mental health professionals, specifically education that teaches LGBT affirmative therapy and social justice advocacy. Suggested efforts include the areas of public policy and schools where mental health professionals can use their expertise to advocate for laws and amendments that will ban discrimination on the basis of gender identity expression and sexual orientation (Dworkin & Yi, 2003).

Every two years, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) conducts a national school climate survey. They are the leading national education organization committed to ensuring safe schools for all students. Through their biennial reports, they examine the prevalence of anti-LGBT victimization and biased language, the effects these actions have on all students, and the school supports that can help improve school climate. Since GLSEN began collecting data for these reports in the early
1990’s, we have seen an increase in policies that help to provide LGBT students equal access to a safe school environment. For example, in 2013, California passed legislation that gives transgender students the right to participate in school according to their gender identity as opposed to their assigned sex. The Department of Education has added LGBT-inclusive items on a number of their surveys, while GLSEN has led a coalition on advising the Department of Education on such data collection. Additionally, in 2014, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention included sexual orientation items to their Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS).

Despite these advancements, GLSEN’s School Climate Survey remains one of the only national studies on LGBT youth and the only national study to focus on transgender students’ experiences (Kosciw et al., 2014). GLSEN is continually adapting and fine-tuning their approach to the NSCS, making sure to include questions that currently capture what is going on in today’s schools. Their data allows advocates, researchers, educators, and other school personnel to better understand what contributes to safe, healthy, and affirming school environments.

GLSEN’s 2013 report consisted of 7,898 students in grades 6 to 12, with the largest representation being from grades 10 and 11. These students were between the ages of 13 and 21. GLSEN found that of these 7,898 students, nearly 6 in 10 (55%) felt unsafe at school due to their sexual orientation while almost 4 in 10 (37.8%) felt unsafe due to their gender expression. Close to two thirds of LGBT students heard homophobic comments frequently or often at school and more than half of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from school staff. Related to gender identity, more than
half of students heard negative statements about gender expression frequently or often at school.

A homophobic school climate has been linked to negative outcomes among LGB youth such as suicide, truancy, drug use, and depression (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). A quantitative study of 1,032 students in grades 9-12 found that LGBT youth scored higher than non-LGBT students on the depressive symptomology scale and were also more likely than their heterosexual, non-transgender peers to report self-harm and suicidal ideation. Youth who identified as a sexual minority or transgender were also more likely to report perceived discrimination; more LGBT males reported being discriminated against (50%) than females (25%). These findings supported the researchers’ hypothesis that perceived discrimination accounts for higher levels of emotional distress among males. A surprising outcome of the study was that while the authors hypothesized the same for females, perceived discrimination was not found to be a significant mediator between female’s LGBT status and self-harm or suicidal ideation; it was a moderate mediator between LGBT status and depressive symptomology though (Almeida et al., 2009).

Another quantitative study of 97 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning high school youth found that sexual minority adolescents reported more bullying, depressive symptoms, and sexual harassment, as well as less companionship with close friends and less closeness to their mothers. Experiences of peer victimization and lack of support were found to contribute to more emotional and behavioral difficulties in this population (Williams et al., 2005). These difficulties may extend past high school and into adulthood. For example, D’Augelli (2006) examined childhood gender atypicality
and sexual orientation victimization (SOV) among 528 lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth (52% male and 48% female) and found a significant association between gender atypicality and both poor mental health and victimization. Symptoms of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were more commonly reported by those who were gender atypical in childhood compared to those who were not. Eighty percent of youth in this study reported verbal attacks, with the average initial age of receiving verbal SOV occurring at age 11 for males and age 14 for females, and as early as age 6. Youth in this study also reported sexual victimization because they were LGB or perceived to be LGB (9%) and physical attacks (14%). Sexual attacks occurred as early as age 9 and physical attacks as early as age 8.

Other research on gender atypicality among LGB youth shows it being linked to SOV and also suggests that gender atypicality in adolescence is more tolerated among girls than boys (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002). Similarly, young people have reported hearing more negative remarks about gender non-conformity towards boys than girls (Kosciw et al., 2008; Toomey et al., 2010). Using data from the Family Acceptance Project's young adult survey, Toomey et al. (2010) found that adolescent experiences of gender nonconformity and victimization based on LGBT status were linked to high rates of negative psychosocial adjustment, such as depression and life satisfaction.

While research has shown an association between negative school climates and poor mental health, poor academic performance (D'Augelli, 2002; Kosciw, 2008; Toomey et al., 2012), increased substance abuse, truancy, and suicide (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009) among sexual minority and gender nonconforming youth,
there have also been studies documenting the resiliency of this population. LGBTQ++ youth do advocate and work to dismantle heteronormative environments while serving as leaders within their schools.

A related area of literature that continues to expand are scholarly works that examine the positive impacts of gay-straight alliances (GSAs) in schools. These youth-driven groups are implemented into schools so that heterosexual and LGBT youth may socialize, receive and give support, feel empowered, and participate in advocacy (Poteat et al., 2015; Mayberry, 2013; Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004). One qualitative study using a grounded theory approach to data analysis examined the advocacy efforts of gay-straight alliance advisers (Graybill, Varjas, & Watson, 2009). The researchers recruited 22 high school personnel in the position of GSA advisers. Findings from this study suggest that the advisers used a range of strategies to advocate for LGBT youth; however, they did not address how often these strategies were implemented or how efficacious they were.

The advisers reported that their strategies depended on the type of content they were dealing with and the situational variables such as personality and their own sexual identity. Advisers also noted that they were used as an LGBT resource, although differently depending on whether it was a student or colleague. They provided recommendations for school personnel who wish to advocate for LGBT youth in high schools and suggested that advocates provide colleagues with statistical information demonstrating the link between negative school climate and behavioral, emotional, academic, and social functioning of LGBT youth. For example, advocates should frame advocacy in terms of the negative academic and emotional consequences that may
ensue when there is a failure to advocate. Advisers also recommended that educators acquire their own multicultural competency skills related to LGBT issues and frame advocacy. The limitations of this study include that most of the participants were teachers so the majority of their time is spent in the classroom and participants were not given the opportunity to validate findings. Researchers encountered resistance when calling schools to speak with GSA advisors and thus it is recommended that future research document such barriers and the relationship of these barriers to school climate.

A similar study conducted by Graybill (2011) quantitatively examined the experiences of school-based social justice advocates, specifically ecological factors that influenced the advocacy of GSA advisers. An exploratory factor analysis identified two dimensions, barriers and facilitators, that defined their advocacy experiences. More facilitators than barriers were reported, although researchers admit this may be a function of the sample and perhaps those experiencing more barriers are less likely to complete a survey about their experiences. The strongest facilitator of advocacy efforts included professional and personal support and the strongest barrier was the community, such as lack of community support and resources. Advisers located in rural areas reported more barriers and less facilitators. Additionally, level of training determined the level of facilitators. Advisers who felt more prepared to advocate based on their previous LGBT training experienced more facilitators. This is consistent with previous research citing lack of training as a barrier to advocating for LGBT youth in schools (Sawyer, 2006).
GLSEN’s annual report (2013) shows that LGBT students who attend schools that have a GSA, or similar student club, have reported experiencing safer, more school positive climates. The same is reported from students who attend schools with supportive school personnel who frequently and effectively respond to harassment and assault. Supportive school staff members can foster positive engagement in school and increase students’ motivation to learn (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Summary and Discussion of Literature Review

The content of this literature review suggests a gap in our knowledge base of school counselor activism and the development of an activist identity. With urging from professional mandates, school counselors are in a position to become agents of change within their schools. They can help create the positive learning environment that LGBTQ++ youth desire and need. More studies examining the ways in which school counselors systematically advocate for their LGBTQ++ students, the developmental trajectory of becoming an activist, and how they integrate this role into their professional identity is warranted.

A critical issue for the profession seems to be the lack of attention to activist development in counselor training programs. While suggestions for how to infuse this type of training into programs were illuminated, questions still remain on activist identity development and experiences among school counselors that would inform this implementation. More specifically, a deeper understanding of how school counselors navigate barriers to advocating for LGBT youth is needed as well as what factors motivate and sustain their advocacy efforts.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Given the relevance of activism to the counseling profession, the documented experiences of LGBTQ++ individuals, and the lack of research connecting the two, an exploratory qualitative study meant to highlight the experiences of school counselors who identify as social justice activists will advance knowledge and possibly offer implications for counselor education. With this study, I sought to understand the pathways, identities, and efforts of school counselors who advocate for LGBTQ++ youth, a historically marginalized population.

Qualitative research is appropriate when the problem needs to be explored further in order to increase understanding (Creswell, 2014). Thus a qualitative approach was warranted here, as there is little known about the phenomena of study and more knowledge is to be gleaned from participants. The exploratory nature of this approach called for more open-ended inquiries and general questions, as opposed to the statistical analysis and close-ended inquiries in a quantitative design (Creswell, 2014; Creswell, 2009). Also informing the decision to employ a qualitative approach was the overall nature of the research problem being addressed, the researcher’s personal experiences, and the intended audience for the study (Creswell, 2009).

The specific type of qualitative approach used in this study was arts-based narrative inquiry research, which is fitting for projects that aim to discover, describe, and explore. This type of approach can be more accessible to nonacademic audiences than traditional methods and allow for research questions to be posed in entirely new ways. Arts-based practices highlight the emotional aspects of life, creating critical awareness and consciousness-raising. Qualitative research is about work that
represents a set of meanings. Much like artistic endeavors, it can be viewed as a craft in which qualitative researchers “compose, orchestrate and weave” (Leavy, 2009, p. 10).

Leavy (2009) notes that arts-based research practices are particularly suitable to studies involving identity work because research in this area usually involves gaining information about experiences with diversity, differences, and prejudice. Identity research can challenge stereotypes that marginalize groups and individuals. With this attention to individual meaning; the data collected was analyzed inductively going from particulars to commonalities as I interpreted meaning from the data. Another consideration in this research design is one’s paradigm (Creswell, 2009). The social-justice orientation of this study and focus on identity warranted an advocacy/participatory worldview.

**Researcher Lens**

**Advocacy/Participatory.** The advocacy/participatory paradigm is often observed when the research includes an action-oriented agenda that may help to change the lives of individuals, participants, and/or the institutions in which they work or live (Creswell, 2009). This paradigm supports advancing an agenda to improve the lives of marginalized individuals. The voice for this change is a result of collaboration between the participants and the researcher; inquiry is completed with others rather than on or to others.

This view holds that issues such as oppression, privilege, empowerment, and inequality should be attended to and at least one social issue should be a focal point of the research. One aim is to spark a dialogue that may induce needed change to occur. Arts-based practices are known to promote dialogue, facilitate empathy, and conjure up
emotional responses (Leavy, 2009). In this study, a focus is on the discrimination of LGBTQ++ individuals, thus, this research seeks to enhance the livelihood and well-being of all those discriminated against or made to feel less than on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. Further, I hope to advance knowledge of school counselors as activists and inform pedagogy and curricula in counselor education programs.

**Research Design: Arts-Based Narrative Inquiry**

**Narrative.** Narrative methodology has come to cross many disciplinary boundaries, blurring the line between art and science. It is used in many different ways and the term *narrative* has come to have many different meanings, but there is often a clear affiliation with *story* (Abbott, 2008; Reissman & Speedy, 2007). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) describe narrative inquiry as “the study of experience as story” (p. 477). Narratives are crucial to the human experience, helping individuals define their identity (Bold, 2012) and narrative inquiry explores these identities and the ways in which people impose meaning on their life experiences (Bamberg, 2006). Clandinin and Rosiek (2006) assert that while the beginning point for narrative inquiry is experience, it is much more than that:

> an exploration of the social, cultural and institutional narratives within which individual’s experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted - but in a way that begins and ends that inquiry in the storied lives of the people involved. Narrative inquirers study an individual’s experience in the world and, through the study, seek ways of enriching and transforming that experience for themselves and others (p. 42).
In John Dewey's (1938) philosophy of pragmatism, he outlines two criteria of experience, continuity and interaction. Continuity is described as the notion that human beings learn from their experiences and these lessons influence future experiences, so that every experience has both a past and a future. Interaction refers to the interaction between past experiences and the present situation, thus creating the present experience; individuals are always in a social context and their present experience must be understood as a function of their unique, past experiences (Dewey, 1938).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy to develop their definition of narrative inquiry as:

- a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that made up people’s lives, both individual and social (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20).

The changeable and selective representation of the lived experiences will depend on the interpretation of the person who experienced the event, the intended audience, and the interaction between the person inquiring and the teller. The interpretation must align with the entire narrative (Abbott, 2008). The narrative is continual as the present connects to both the past and the potential future (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). The meaning of the past event is understood and remembered in the present context (Josselson & Lieblich, 2001). This makes narrative inquiry a useful method for exploring the development of meaning. Ultimately, each participant’s narrative tells the story of
the how they *came to be* within their own personal, social, and historical context. The narrative that is constructed is not just about the meaning of that experience at that particular point in time for a particular audience. Context influences the interpretation of the meaning, as well as what is observed and what is filtered out. Further, cultural symbols and language influence representations of reality. Knowledge is never “point-of-view-less” (Bruner, 1991, p. 3).

**Arts-based research.** The narrative approach employed in this study is situated within the methodological genre of arts-based research. The term “arts-based research” was coined by Elliot Eisner in 1993 (Barone & Eisner, 2012). The artistic and aesthetic components of social science research have grown and expanded as researchers and practitioners recognize the way arts can convey meaning. Although Barone and Eisner (2012) argue that artistry in scientific research has existed all along.

Arts-based research practices are described as methodological tools implemented at every stage of the research (Leavy, 2009). An overarching goal of arts-based research is the attempt to make a difference in the lives of ordinary citizens as well as key decision makers such as politicians, legislators, and policymakers. Like many other researchers, arts-based researchers hope to inspire ethical social change, increase the agency of those involved, and to reform professional practice (Cole & Knowles, 2010). The arts can elicit emotions that other types of research may not provoke. For example, stories are powerful and impactful when individuals see themselves in the story or connect with the material in some way. Research outcomes may be shared with a wide breadth of audience, perhaps connecting academia to the community. This type of research acknowledges that the human condition is multi-
faceted and comprised of physical, emotional, cultural, social, and spiritual dimensions that engage with the world in various ways (Cole & Knowles, 2007).

Narrative research is concerned with how individuals construct meaning in their stories and the arts add a viable method of uncovering the emotional aspects of life. The arts-based frame can help participants “vicariously re-experience” the social phenomena or events that led them to this point in their lives (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 20). This allows for an understanding of values and meanings that were previously misunderstood. In narrative inquiry, the way that participants tell their stories sheds light on the way they perceive their life. The way they begin and end their stories, what they choose to reveal, and how they tell their stories are all vital aspects. Barone and Eisner also maintain that a process of “deep persuasion” occurs, in which readers or viewers are invited to attend in such a way that they acquire a degree of empathic understanding (2012, p. 22).

At its deepest level, arts-based research is about aesthetic and artistic approaches to raising and addressing social issues (Barone & Eisner, 2012). This approach works well with social justice oriented research, as it often includes gaining information about experiences with diversity, differences, and prejudice. In this way, power relations can be revealed, dominant ideologies challenged, and dialogue promoted. Artistic forms of representation have the power to connect people on visceral and emotional levels, which can help to dispute stereotypes and build connections (Leavy, 2009). With a nod to Martin Buber’s idea of imagining the real, Josselson (1995) says, “We take whatever observations we have made of the external world and, making them part of ourselves, interpret them and tell a story about what
we already know” (p. 29). Personal narratives reveal the complexities of the human conditions, shape our understanding, and can be the means for which both participants and researchers make sense of them (Josselson, 1995).

**Research Questions**

There are very few studies that investigate school counselor activism development. There is even more paucity in the literature about the ways in which school counselors navigate their roles as a counselor and activist, working on behalf of students but also extending efforts to reach other marginalized groups. There is evidence of counselors feeling unprepared to work with sexual minority and gender expansive individuals even though counseling guidelines specifically call for counselors to be agents of change in this arena (ACA, 2010; ALGBTIC LGBQQIA Competencies Taskforce, 2013). Given the lack of research in this area, the purpose of this qualitative study is tri-fold: (a) to examine the level of LGBT competency and LGBT social justice advocacy work of practicing school counselors, (b) explore how school counselors came to identify as activists, and (c) determine what motivates and sustains the work of school counselors who advocate for the LGBTQ++ community. Research Questions include:

1. What is salient in shaping the participants’ activist identities with regard to the LGBTQ++ community?
2. In what ways are school counselors activists for and with LGBTQ++ students?
3. What motivates and sustains school counselors’ social justice efforts?
Participants

Participants (n=4) ranged in age from 44-61 and each person identified as White, cisgender, and female. The demographic locations, size, and systemic structure of each of their schools varied. Three participants described their school as suburban while one participant described her school as urban. Each participant’s highest degree is that of a Master’s degree in a mental health related discipline. Their work responsibilities collectively included individual and small group counseling, teaching social/emotional skills, consultation with teachers and parents, crisis and behavior interventions, developing social/emotional curriculum, home visits, and serving on collaborative school teams that help meet the educational, social, and emotional needs of students.

Recruitment

Narrative inquiry often produces rich case studies out of small sample sizes (Leavy, 2009), as this type of approach works well to capture the life experiences of a small group of individuals (Creswell et al., 2007; Creswell, 2014). I sought to keep my sample size small, in order to gain depth over breadth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002). My sample was capped at 4 in order to maintain the small sample size recommended by experts in narrative methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Qualitative sampling is always purposeful and criterion-based. That is, participants were deliberately selected to provide information-rich data and specific criteria was used based on the questions guiding the study (Patton, 2015).

Upon receiving University Institutional Review Board approval, recruitment occurred via purposeful sampling and snowball sampling (See Appendix A for recruitment letter). Purposeful sampling as a recruitment method involves selecting
participants according to the needs of the study. This was appropriate because I explored the experiences of a particular group of individuals in a particular setting (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2002). In other words, I made the decision about who or what is sampled, what form the sampling would take, and how many people would be sampled. Snowball sampling gave participants the option to refer other “information rich cases” who met the criteria of the study (Patton, 2002, p. 239). Recruitment materials were sent to individuals who would be willing to pass on my information to potential participants.

Selection criteria for participants included the stipulation that individuals must be mental health professionals engaged in school counseling tasks within their places of employment and identify as advocates for the LGBTQ++ community. They must also hold at least a master’s degree in a mental health field. Participants practiced and resided within the United States. Narratives are positioned within cultural, historical, and social contexts (Reissman, 2003) and it makes sense that my participants would be situated within the same larger societal and political context if I am to provide implications for counselor education programs located in the United States.

I advertised my study through two professional counseling organizations: the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC), the latter is a division of the American Counseling Association (ACA). ASCA “promotes school counseling professionals and interest in activities that affect the personal, educational, and career development of students. ASCA members also work with parents, educators, and community members to provide a positive learning environment” (ACA Divisions,
2016). ALGBTIC “educates counselors to the unique needs of client identity development; and a non-threatening counseling environment by aiding in the reduction of stereotypical thinking and homoprejudice” (ACA Divisions, 2016, p.1).

This emphasis on challenging social conditions and the call for counselors as social change agents working at individual, institutional, and political levels as part of normative practice is fairly new. Even so, research has provided some insight on what is involved in social justice work and professional organizations within the counseling field have expanded language to include social justice competencies and standards. What is missing is knowledge of activist identity development among school counselors to include the ways in which they navigate this new role that calls for work beyond traditional talk therapy. What is also in question is the human experience of integrating one’s professional identity with advocating for social change that challenges the status quo. Of relevance here is the context of the counseling environment within a political atmosphere in which LGBTQ++ rights are very much a point of contention.

Procedures

After being in contact with each participant via email, we spoke on the phone so that I could first explain the purpose and process of the study, as well as give participants an opportunity to ask questions. Next, I emailed details of the study procedures to be followed, the informed consent form, and a link to complete a demographic questionnaire to each individual via email (See Appendix B for Informed Consent Form). The questionnaire gathered basic demographic information, a summary of each school counselor’s responsibilities, their definition of activism, and information regarding LGBTQ++ training for their role as a school counselor. I met with two
participants in person and used digital video conferencing to meet with the other two participants. Interviews were divided into two sections.

**Interview Methods.** There are different ways to approach narrative inquiry and multiple methods of data collection (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Reismann, 2008). For the purpose of this study, I collaborated with my participants and actively involved them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I followed Mishler's (1986) model of the interviewer and interviewee as two participants who are jointly constructing meaning and narrative. Words only provide one aspect of communication; gestures, body language, and sound are just some examples of ways to communicate (Reissman, 2008). This adds validity to the process as both parties negotiate meaning (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Further, Jones (2001) writes that the qualitative interviewer, from data collection to analysis to write-up, engages in a visualization process as they put together each participant’s story and include their visual impressions. He adds that, “The bricolage of images and nonverbal clues accumulated to produce additional keys that unlocked the narratives, enriched the life stories and enhanced the analyses” (p. 3).

Both arts-based methods and semi-structured interviews were used to elicit responses from the participants. Participants were invited to communicate with images and words from different visual genres and invited to submit any other relevant artifacts. Examples of artifacts collected include a sample of curriculum that includes sex education, an editorial about an anti-bullying program, and a National Day of Silence memento. I asked narrators to explain their reasoning for including the artifact and how the artifact(s) contributes to their stories (Reissman, 2008).
The degree of artistic ability was not of interest during the interviews; arts-based methods were used in combination with a semi-structured interview approach to help generate detailed accounts of the research topics, as opposed to general or brief responses. Visual methods used in conjunction with semi-structured interviews can enhance contextualization of narratives and tap into the potential for non-verbal communication to access “othered” ways of knowing (Kolar et al., 2015). The interviews were purposeful and specific areas were addressed; however, the interviewee had the option to choose their path and explore thoughts and feelings as they developed. Using a semi-structured interview approach allowed the process to remain guided enough to have direction, yet flexible and open-ended (Miller & Crabtree, 1999).

**Interview One: “A Time When..” Prompt.** Prior to beginning the first interview, I asked participants to complete “A Time When..” prompt inquiries (Appendix B). This activity was provided to participants prior to the interview in order to help them begin thinking about important events and experiences related to their activism. The prompts and follow-up questions during the interviews inquired about the trajectory of participants’ activist identity development and experiences in the context of relevant professional, personal, historical, and political events. In recalling their life events, the narrative process was enhanced as each participant explored the meaning behind notable events.

The instructions for the prompt inquiries were intentionally broad in order to foster creativity and flexibility. I began with this open-ended inquiry to help put participants in a narrative frame of mind. This frame of mind has been described as self-observation in which participants recall their stories in a self-reflective manner
Another reason I ask participants to answer the prompts before the interview is so that they are free from any preconception that the interview could potentially incite. I asked participants to bring their prompt responses with them to the first interview, and then asked them to verbally elaborate during the interview.

An interview guide accompanied this portion of the process (Appendix C). Questions allowed me to gain insight into the phenomenon of study; I was not searching for a particular response or a right answer. The extent to which I referred to my interview guide depended on the narrator’s responses and the interview environment (Miller & Crabtree, 1999).

The prompts and semi-structured interview format allowed myself and the participant to co-construct a story that highlighted (a) their pathway to becoming an activist in the role of a professional school counselor; (b) experiences of activism and what has helped or hindered; (c) development of competence in advocating for the LGBTQ++ population; and (d) the ways in which they navigate activism within their role as a school counselor.

**Interview Two: Visualization Exercise.** During part two of the interview, I began with a visualization exercise. Using Keifer-Boyd and Maitland Gholson’s (2007) visualization strategies as a guide, I developed a script to help participants: (a) relax (b) focus on an event, (c) recall specific details about the event, and (d) translate this memory and associated thoughts and emotions into a visual representation of the event (see Appendix D for visualization script). The event that I asked participants to recall was an experience in which they were an activist for LGBTQ++ students. Art materials
were provided and participants were instructed to a modality of their choice in order to create the associated image.

The opportunity to create a visual image can instigate deeper reflection and give participants an opportunity to express oneself through a more creative modality (Morrow, 1998). As they created the visual representation of this event, I gave each participant space to develop their image but invited them to initiate dialogue with me during their creation of the image. When they were finished creating, I referred to my interview guide:

1. Tell me about this image/event.
   a. Where are you?
   b. Who is with you?
   c. How do you feel?
   d. What was significant about this event?
   e. In what ways do you feel supported/not supported?
   f. How would you situate this event within your identity?
   g. Where would this event fall on your timeline?

2. What did this exercise reveal to you about yourself/your work/your identities?

   **Trustworthiness.** I am aware that with qualitative research, two important threats to the validity of my conclusions are researcher bias and reflexivity. It was important that I considered how my own values and expectations may influence the conduct and conclusions of the study, as well as recognize that I am part of the world I am studying (Maxwell, 2013). Trying to minimize my influence is not a realistic goal for
qualitative research. Instead, it is important to understand how I am influencing it (Maxwell, 2013). In an effort to maintain the integrity of this research and ensure rigor, I followed multiple procedures (Creswell, 2009). My strategies for trustworthiness include: (a) Reflexive journaling; (b) Member checking; (c) Maintaining an audit trail; and (d) Triangulation of data methods.

Reflexivity is defined as “self-awareness and agency within that self-awareness” (Rennie, 2004, p. 183). In other words, it indicates an awareness of the identity, self, and researcher within the research process. As an attempt to approach this study reflexively and handle biases and assumptions that came from my own life experiences, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process (Morrow, 2005). This journal was a space for me to record my experiences, reactions, and emerging awareness of biases or assumptions that arise. These can then be examined and set aside as much as they can be or at least consciously integrated into the analysis. I wrote in a journal after each interview, including my reactions to participants, inclinations I may have about potential findings, and thoughts, feelings, and emotions regarding the process.

Member checking or participant checking is the process of involving participants and consulting with them to check for “goodness of fit” of developing findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). This process allowed participants to clarify responses and accurately communicate meaning. I asked for clarity and checked for understanding during the interviews, forwarded transcripts and case synopses to participants for their review and then spoke with each participant to make sure my interpretation reflected the interviewee's meanings (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Golafshani, 2003; Morrow, 2005). It is
ultimately the interviewer who interprets the participants' experiences and meaning is derived from the interaction between interviewer and participants thus it was important that I asked participants to engage in a round of member checking. I asked participants to let me know if my synopsis accurately represented them and provided the opportunity to clarify or elaborate as they believed to be necessary.

My third strategy for maintaining trustworthiness at all stages of this research endeavor was to keep an audit trail. Hays and Singh (2012) believe that keeping an audit trail is a necessity for all qualitative research. An audit trail provided physical evidence of analysis procedures and systematic data collection (Hays & Singh, 2012). My audit trail included a timeline of research activities, participant contracts, demographic questionnaires, reflexive journal entries, informed consent documents, interview protocols and transcripts, and artifacts.

The fourth strategy, triangulation of data methods, refers to the multiple methods of data collection (Hays & Singh, 2012) and collecting information from a diverse range of individuals (Maxwell, 2013). Fielding and Fielding (1986) emphasize triangulated methods may possess biases and it is important to look for where a bias may exist and determine how to handle that bias. As outlined earlier, I gathered data from individual interviews, artwork, and artifacts. The in-depth interviews allowed me to get a thick and rich description of participants' identities and experiences (Golafshani, 2003). Some events were discussed more than once, adding further validity.
Data Analysis

The purpose of analysis in qualitative research is to dig deep into the meaning behind different situations and peoples’ understandings of the world. It often takes place in a particular context with a small number of participants and for a purpose related to an improvement in social conditions or a chance in practice (Bold, 2012). Findings are not meant to be generalizable (Clandinin, 2007). However, Bold (2012) states that qualitative research can be of importance to people in similar contexts and places; it is this purposefulness that makes qualitative studies valid and reliable. Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to this applicability of findings to other settings as transferability. Transferability allows me to cautiously make extrapolations about how my findings may reach other similar settings (Patton, 2002).

Data analysis was based on empirical-phenomenological psychology, specifically Fischer and Wertz’ method of analysis, first formalized by Amedeo Giorgi at Duquesne University (Giorgi; 1970; Fischer & Wertz; 2002) and influenced by philosopher-psychologist, Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1963, 1974). Phenomenology is a qualitative research method developed by Edmund Husserl, a philosopher whose scientific methods assisted psychological researchers in investigating human experience and behavior (Wertz, 2005; see Husserl, 1962/1913). Fischer and Wertz base their methods on phenomenology’s foundations in European philosophy as with this method, the researcher believes that person’s world is constructed in part by the individual who lives it (Fischer & Wertz, 2002). They emphasize flexibility with their method and encourage making use of different kinds of data and utilizing different steps or forms of documentation as appropriate. By “psychology”, Fischer and Wertz refer to the study of
both human behavior and also situations lived out by the individual. This method involves asking participants to describe a particular situation they have experienced and then document the essential psychological constituents from the description. Participants in my study were asked to write about and describe multiple situations as prompted by the “A Time When...” inquiries, semi-structured interviews questions, and the visualization exercise. “Empirical” includes (a) my reflection of events, and (b) making the data and steps of analysis that led to my findings available to colleagues (Fischer & Wertz, 2002).

In addition to the empirical-phenomenological frame, the arts-based narrative inquiry was helpful in guiding this study because people’s lives occur within specific contexts and cultures at particular points in time. Experiences arise from previous experiences and there is a storied context in which they occur (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Analysis can begin at any point in the process: data collection, analysis, synthesis, and so on. There are a variety of ways to analyze narratives (Bold, 2012; Hays & Singh, 2012; Butler-Kisber, 2010). A task of qualitative analysis is to illuminate the perceived meanings of an event for participants and then across participants. These meanings are then examined for what they communicate about the experience in general, or some aspect of the experience. I used interviewing as my primary means of eliciting stories of identity and narrative accounts about events and experiences thus it made sense to incorporate the empirical-phenomenological analysis. I aimed to understand the participants’ lived experiences within a social context (Laverty, 2007; Tappan, 1997; Thorne & Nam, 2008).
It is important to note the key assumptions of narrative research that guided this analysis: (1) events over time are connected and delivered in narrative form; (2) the identities of individuals are shaped by the stories they recall and share with others; and (3) narratives change depending on the context, narrator, and audience (Hays & Singh, 2012). Stories are viewed as the primary source of data and provide information about what meaning various phenomena hold for the participant (Hays & Newsome, 2008). Stories in this study were told via the “A Time When..” prompts, verbally during interviews, but also through the creation of an image following the visualization exercise. The creative arts component can help qualitative researchers pay close attention to the actual process of meaning-making (Hunter et al., 2002). This storytelling is part of what makes narrative a natural research tradition for counseling (Hays & Singh, 2012). Arts-based narrative inquiry helped to uncover personal and cultural information about each individual. Additionally, descriptions of situations provide data that may even transcend the participants’ own knowledge of the topic (Wertz, 2005).

Data was analyzed to determine how the individual constructs, maintains, and performs their identities as activists, and how this has changed over time. According to Renata Tesch (1990), “qualitative analysis can and should be done artfully, even playfully, but it also requires a great amount of methodological knowledge and intellectual competence” (p. 97). My approach to analysis can be broken down into 5 steps: (a) familiarizing myself with each transcript through multiple readings, (b) demarcating transcripts into units categorized by research questions, (c) condensing the units into narratives (individualized case synopses) that retain the most important
components and dispose of nonessential facts, (d) comparing and contrasting transcripts/individual case synopses among participants, and (e) creating a visual illustration of findings. The first 4 steps were accompanied by jotting down emerging patterns and similarities among the participant responses. This process was informed by Fischer and Wertz, as they offer a similar 5 step process not intended to be a set of instructions but meant to provide a sense of how one may incorporate an empirical-phenomenological analysis. The last step I took, creating a visual collage, was inspired by Butler and Borgerson (1997), who created a visual illustration following an analysis in which they drew from Fischer and Wertz’s empirical-phenomenological approach.

**Presentation of Data**

Data is presented in three forms – individual case synopses, an illustrated narrative, and a collage created to visually represent findings. Once the data was in written form, transcripts were first read without a research focus, in order to get a deeper sense of the person’s expression (Wertz, 2005). Descriptions and responses can be lengthy and complex so after the initial reading, I began to organize the data by noting distinctive quotes or emerging patterns in the margins of the transcripts. Jotting down reflections on emerging similarities helped to reveal what was essential in each participant’s response. This identification of commonalities was preparatory in that it merely helped me organize the material for analysis later on (Wertz, 2005). I first wanted to create the individual case synopses and then return to the transcripts, where I would later combine the two for a more in-depth, structured analysis, allowing me to create the illustrated narrative and collage.
**Case Synopsis.** Creating the case synopses allowed me to present what was particularly salient in each person’s experience (Fischer & Wertz, 1979; 2002). This approach involves shaping the data into relevant narratives by connecting, ordering, and condensing the material – maintaining as much as possible of the participants’ own words. Centering on each participant’s unique experiences provided a more focused analysis, leading to a more holistic understanding (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). The synopsis adheres very closely to the participant’s language with verbatim text from the transcript being presented in bold font. Transcripts are shortened to about one-third or one-half, depending on the participant’s style of interviewing (Fischer & Wertz, 2002). Examples of material that was not included in the synopsis include personal, identifying information about the participant that is not relevant to the study, the occupation of parents. I wrote each synopsis in first person and attempted to maintain each individual’s language and style of speaking. Content is not presented in the order it was discussed during the interview, but instead was rearranged to facilitate readability and organized according to the research questions. These changes were minor as it was important to retain each individual’s essence and perceived meaning behind their experiences.

After reading through each transcription 2-3 times, I then read through the transcripts focusing on one research question at a time. As I did this, I demarcated the transcripts by pulling out participant quotes that answered the research question I was asking of the data at that time. Demarcation units were either single phrases or whole paragraphs; the criteria for a unit was that the phrases had to stand out as a discernible moment in the overall experience. At times, I broke apart a longer participant quote
into multiple units if I realized that part of it belonged better with a different research question; sometimes units were placed with more than one research question. The process of demarcating is meant to ensure accountability and thoroughness (Fischer & Wertz, 2002).

For each individual research question and participant, I created a cluster of units that consisted of verbatim responses. Here is an example of this demarcation process when I asked a participant’s transcript my first research question:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is salient in shaping Helen’s activist identity with regard to the LGBTQ++ community?</th>
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<tr>
<td>(0:42:46) My activism for LGBT issues was really a result of me finding myself [chuckle] after being divorced in a lesbian relationship and actually being very... For many years I was very quiet about it. It was a very shameful situation for me, and it was something that was... I don't wanna use the words 'not accepted', but in my school community, and even in my office, nobody talked about the fact that I dated a woman, and so it was pretty taboo. And at some point, about two years into my relationship, I... I don't know why or how, but I think this is a common experience, that when you find yourself in a marginalized population, you really have to be the leader in getting people to talk about those issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0:44:39) And the more I shared, the more it changed peoples’ views and the more people felt comfortable to say, &quot;How was your weekend? What did you guys do,&quot; and to just be inclusive. So I would say that was the beginning for me. And then we, obviously, in the counseling office, saw LGBT students who had needs and I could start identifying with that and started asking for a GSA. And had done lots of research and... But it did... It took until we had students, probably four or five years of asking until we got a GSA started. So that was the beginning for me, it was coming out and telling my own story that really sparked it, and realizing how difficult that is and how it really. It was really my responsibility. I had to really own it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After reaching a point of saturation in my reading of the transcripts and creating units for each question, I combined these findings with the visual images that each
participant created in order to write my individual case synopses. Individual case synopses provided a sense of each participant’s story pertaining to their activist trajectory and experiences, as well as foreshadowed the common elements that would emerge. After this, I compared and contrasted the case synopses, as well as similar units in the transcripts in order to identify similarities and differences. An illustrated narrative was created to present the findings.

Illustrated narrative. Similarities among participant data were developed in the form of an illustrated narrative. Data was organized in this way to present what was found to be common among participants, yet also retain the concrete specifics for individual participants. It differs from the case synopses in that it highlights commonalities as well as verbatim text from the multiple narratives (Fischer & Wertz, 2002).

Composing the illustrated narrative consisted of revisiting my initial notes on similarities, dissertation memos, individual case synopses, and transcripts. Eliciting commonalities required several close readings of the transcripts, which I marked up by highlighting and writing notes in the margins. I referred back to the audio recordings to check for clarity and also created a separate memo to organize patterns and commonalities among the participants. This process of viewing, reviewing, reorganizing memos, and comparing and contrasting illuminated repetitiveness that suggested commonalities.

As I began to code the data, my initial coding represented words, phrases, and concepts that had a higher frequency of occurrence. I not only coded for frequency but also for importance. This importance was based off of events that appeared to have a
strong influence on the participants or concepts that they had strong reactions to. From these codes, similarities among the data emerged, which I organized around social critical theory.

**Collage.** Findings are presented in a third form, a visual collage. The term “collage” has French roots, taken from the French word, *coller*, meaning “to stick” (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010). It is the process of gluing fragments of images or materials to a flat surface in order to convey a phenomenon (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010). The origination of collage in European art is credited to Picasso and Braque, specifically art from 1911 and 1912 that involved pieces of chair caning and newspaper to make still life representations (Vaughan, 2004). With this work, they aimed to make art more accessible and used it to question the social and political agendas of the time (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010).

Due to the arts-based narrative frame, creating a collage felt like a natural extension of the research. Collage has been used in inquiry as a reflective process, as a way of conceptualizing ideas, and as a method of elicitation (Butler-Kisber, 2008; 2010). In this study, it was used as a way to portray the essence of concepts that have emerged, as a way to think reflectively about the data, and make connections among findings (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010). Its creation allowed further analysis and organization of the data, beyond reviewing text transcripts and artifacts.

Arts-based research acknowledges studio practice as a valid form of inquiry (Seigesmund, 2013; Sullivan, 2006, 2009). Images, including words, have the potential to conjure up feelings and meaning that are not available in written text (Gerstenblatt, 2013). Collage is recognized as a form of inquiry that may be used to juxtapose images
and ideas and, in some circles, is considered a valid, communicative space for critical and political practice (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008). I hope that this visual representation will make the findings ever more accessible to the reader, as it adds another layer of analysis.

**Procedures for Attaining Dependability and Confirmability**

It is important that this study be dependable (or *reliable* in quantitative terminology). I maintained complete transparency as the research process unfolded. I kept a reflexive journal that helped me visualize and record my thoughts throughout the analysis from text to trend to theme. This process also helped me become aware of any biases influencing my interpretation of the data. My documents were password protected and accessible only by me. I used pseudonyms and did not reveal any identifying information so as to protect each participant’s confidentiality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participants had the opportunity to offer feedback during and after the interview process to ensure that they were authentically heard. This was accomplished by providing my transcripts and individual case synopses to each participant so they could check for accuracy as well as clarify or elaborate. I wanted to make sure that the synopses I created adequately represented each participant’s activist trajectory and experiences (Fischer & Wertz, 2002). It was important that every aspect of the research process be explained so that others may confirm my findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability was addressed via my audit trail that included all journal entries, email correspondence, transcriptions, coding, memos, artifacts, and any other writings affiliated with this project (Creswell, 2014).
Thus far, I have identified the need for more research documenting the experiences and activist identity development among school counselors who advocate for and with their LGBTQ++ students. I have described critical social theory’s applicability to this study. The literature review indicated a need for more comprehensive counselor training programs and research on the identity and navigation of counselors who identify as activists in the context of a school environment. My data collection, procedures, and analysis are informed by arts-based narrative inquiry and empirical-phenomenological analysis, which allowed me to understand the meanings participants place on their lived experiences and get a sense of their activist trajectories. Various methods to establish trustworthiness were discussed as it is important that this study is valid and reliable, in order to contribute to the existing knowledge base in counselor education.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

This content of this chapter includes an introduction to the four unique participants in this study and a presentation of the findings that surfaced in relation to my research questions, which are: (a) what is salient in shaping the participants’ activist identities with regard to the LGBTQ++ community?, (b) in what ways are school counselors activists for and with LGBTQ++ students?, and (c) what motivates and sustains school counselors’ social justice efforts?

Data include in-depth interview sessions, four images created as part of the second interview’s visualization exercise, and artifacts including a letter to school board members, a LGBTQA+ “Day of Silence” memento, curriculum materials that accompany a “social sexuality” class co-taught by one of the participants, and a list of LGBTQ++ specific trainings facilitated by a participant. Data analysis uncovered three major commonalities: a) Identifying with the LGBTQ++ community, b) Pattern of recognizing oppression and working towards change, and c) Education as a form of activism.

In the following sections of this chapter, findings are presented in the form of individual case synopses, an illustrated narrative, and a visual collage. I hope to provide the reader with an accessible account of the study, as well as a clear understanding of the findings.

Individual Case Synopses

Helen’s Story: “It was my responsibility. I had to really own it.”

Helen is a White, 52-year-old, cisgender female person who identifies as bisexual. She has worked at the same suburban high school as a school counselor for 30 years. Helen said her role as a school counselor is to meet the educational, social, and emotional
needs of students so that they can be academically successful in their journeys to earn a high school diploma, but added that it is so much more than that too. She described the climate of her school as supportive, due to many years of work on informing and training teachers, having a LGBTQ+ Alliance in the school, and having teachers who are visibly “out”.

Helen and I met over the course of two days, in the early morning, both just waking up with help from our cups of coffee. Despite the early mornings and our unfamiliarity with each other, Helen was very open about her experience of becoming an activist and her passion for LGBTQ issues filled the room as we spoke. Helen shared that advocacy and activism is all about telling your own story, which is exactly where she began when she integrated her activism into her role as a professional school counselor. She speaks of being a role model and leader to her students – teaching them how to navigate the rough terrain of oppression and engage in conversations that challenge the status quo.

Activist Identity

Lots of topics get me excited. In my personal life, I’d say in the last ten years I feel like I’ve personally tried to be more of an activist about political concerns and those kind of things. My activism for LGBT issues was really a result of me finding myself after being divorced and then in a lesbian relationship. This particular activism wasn’t always there and for many years, I was very quiet about my lesbian relationship. It was a very shameful situation for me, and it was something that was... I don’t want to use the words 'not accepted', but in my school community, and even in my office, nobody talked about the fact that I dated a woman. It was pretty taboo. About two years into my relationship, I found
myself as a leader in getting people to talk about these issues. When I first found myself in this role, I was like, “Really? It takes the minority person to be the one to...”. but I think this is a common experience when you find yourself in a marginalized population. It took me starting to throw out stuff about my life to make it safe for people to talk about it. I just started talking about my weekends, or what my family did, or my partner… I just started sharing. The more I shared, the more it changed peoples' views and the more people felt comfortable to say, "How was your weekend? What did you guys do?" and to just be inclusive. I would say that was the beginning for me - it was coming out and telling my own story that really sparked it, and realizing how difficult that is and how it really... it was my responsibility. I had to really own it.

Meanwhile, in the counseling office, I was seeing LGBT students who had needs and I could start identifying with that and started asking for a GSA. I had done lots of research and it took until we had students, probably four or five years of asking until we got a GSA started. There were students who needed to know that we cared about those issues. There were always LGBT students who were really passionate about advocating for themselves... and there were always students that, especially working in the counseling office, would make their needs very well-known.

I think that once I realized I had some personal passion for something and could be an activist through my job, I realized I am in a better position as a school counselor to do more. Elementary principals or middle school principals, or counselors would call me and say, "Can you come and help talk?" or, "Do you know
about this?" or, "Can you... " I've had a lot of experience working with students who have gone through all kinds of LGBT issues and dealt with them. My expert level really comes from these experiences and the amount of reading and research that I do myself. I also go to as many conferences and trainings as I can.

This activism is very different from that of a traditional counselor because as a counselor we're often listening and asking. We ask good questions but I'm being much more of a communicator in my activist role. What I'm trying to do as an activist is make connections with people, not by just listening or agreeing to what they are saying but giving them alternative points of view and information that they don't have. Things that will cut through their experience. This image represents how activism feels different than the work of a traditional school counselor because I'm doing as much talking if not more, in this situation, which is not the norm when I'm in my office listening to people work out their problems. This is me with a tremendous amount of... like, powerful, things that I want to say and try to hand off to somebody and there's a lot of it. It's got a lot of spin, a lot of force to it.
Figure 4.1: "Understanding". Helen created this image in response to the visualization exercise.

I remember in this situation that the topic of the conversation was about a student wanting to be called a name different than their given name and this teacher was resistant to doing that. I'm trying to connect with the teacher and I don't want their tidal wave of what they think and believe and feel, and how they've been operating to stop my ideas. Because what I want to build is this, the connection between the two of us on how to be helpful to the student in their classroom. It’s just kind of two heads coming together with very different ideas and trying to keep mine in motion. So not stopping theirs and not stopping mine but trying to have equal force here as we’re working it out. There were sparks and
electricity in this situation because we were both giving our two cents, and working through the confusion. The outcome of this dialogue was to come to some understanding, it wasn’t necessarily agreement, but at least two sides were able to share and communicate, and that was the goal. I think school counselors need to fight the hard fight. I feel like we’re constantly swimming upstream against the system, that can make things not fair and equitable for students. I like swimming upstream. I’ve always loved that. That’s part of my nature.

Experiences of being an activist for LGBTQ++ students

I think there are probably lots of times that I helped the students. One of the most memorable times was actually a response to a rash of five national LGBT student suicides. Some of our juniors and seniors were like, "We should respond to this. We should do something." So we helped them organize all of their emotions, and all of their feelings about it, and it became this anti-bullying program that really just blossomed and bloomed. It ended up being at the high school, but then we moved it through the whole district. They were reading anti-bullying books to elementary kids, and the middle schools shot videos, and the high school did videos of anti-bullying stuff. It’s pretty cool, and it’s always more powerful for the kids to think of it themselves. If we give them a canned anti-bullying, they don’t care. If it’s their idea, then yeah.

A teacher wrote an editorial in our student newspaper, that basically took issue with this anti-bullying program and there was a lot of hate language in the editorial. It went unnoticed, it was approved by administration and allowed to run in the student newspaper. We had quite a response to it, students and our group and me
personally, as a representative of our LGBTA alliance and as a gay member of the high school. I helped the kids mobilize how they wanted to respond to it and eventually got to sit down and speak with the teacher one-on-one. It was really great to talk about what my life looked like versus what his life looked like because he talks a lot about the gay lifestyle and I was like, "I'm not sure what you mean. Let's sit down and talk about that." We invited him to come and speak with our group. He ended up doing a full school apology on the morning news. So it was helping the kids mobilize how they wanted to respond and what kind of conversations it sparked and those kind of things.

School counselors are in a really prime spot to lead any kind of change or make a difference in that school community, and so their voice can be pretty important. If they can carve it, or if the community can offer up a spot for them. They're in a really good spot to be an activist because they have that wide angle lens on students and the system that the students are going through. I mean we just get to know... we kind of know everything. You know, all the rules and regulations, all the classes, the curriculum, the teachers, the faculty and staff, we get to know all the facets.

Of course, this can be risky and there are a lot of times I took risks. For example, asking administration for permission for an activity is always risky, but there was a time when I asked administration if we could bring that show to the high school, which would mean that 25 to 30 students would do a monologue about being picked on or being bullied in some way, shape, or form. So it could be because you were a nerd, or because you didn’t wear the right clothes, or LGBT,
or race issues, or ethnicity. My only part was to facilitate the talk back with the audience at the end of the show. So I asked if we could do it for the whole school, which was totally a risk because we had one 10th grade student whose whole monologue was about being gay. He was definitely outing himself in front of the whole entire high school. We also had some students who had been victims by their own peers and they were going to be in front of the kids that had picked on them. The administration said yes and we ran it. And it was awesome. Great things came out of it. The conversation was probably the best because the talk backs were really good actually. One of the 10th grade students, who had performed, noticed a student in the audience who he had picked on and he stepped forward on stage and said, "I’m standing here and I need to say that I see a student out here that I picked on when we were in elementary school and I need to apologize for that". This was very brave and in front of 600 kids. It sparked this whole apology so that other kids started standing up and saying things like, “You know, I need to apologize to so and so over there because I used to pick on you on our school bus all the time”. It was super healing and probably the most powerful thing I’ve ever seen as an educator.

I also had a role in initiating our school’s LGBTA alliance. We started it as a GSA, but the kids wanted it to be more inclusive, and a gay straight alliance is not inclusive in its title so about six years ago we switched it to an LGBTA+ alliance. It took the school many, many years just to get an LGBTA alliance. It took years and years and years of asking. And you always just had to ask and listen to the reasoning and then go away and plan how you would ask the next year, and bring answers to the reasons why they said you couldn’t and there would be new
I was definitely a big player in helping to add sexual orientation and gender identity to our school district’s non-discrimination policy. This was very much a community grassroots effort in that people would go to school board meetings to talk about it and there was a couple that brought a lawsuit against the school district. I met with the superintendent probably every other month for about a year before that lawsuit came. I tried to prime the school board by letting them know, "Look, this is coming down the pipe and we really need to get on board. We need sexual orientation and gender identity in our non-discrimination policy", which we didn’t have until about 10 years ago. I also facilitate gender identity trainings in other high schools and I am working on getting a similar training built in at our high school, at least a short training for art teachers. Our school’s LGBTQA Alliance does quite a few trainings. We were just in a current issues class talking about the bathroom rules and regulations and how to have gender-neutral bathrooms. I do a social studies class, I talk about gender identity. So those kind of things. Learning how to give these trainings is self-initiated and I try to go to as many things as I can to be trained and then take those materials back and give them credit for it, but just reproduce it.
I haven't always succeeded in changing perspectives or policies or in changing the climate, but I've never really viewed those moments as failures. Anytime you have pushback or things don't work out the way you think they should, those are great opportunities. I think this is especially true for LGBT issues, and I really try to teach this to the students I work with. **Those are the best opportunities, actually, to have further conversation.** So you almost look for those pockets of where things aren't working or when you're told “No” or when people say ugly things so that you can step into that space and say, "Okay, this is great." Go ahead, write a letter.

We participate in the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network’s national day of silence every year, and the first couple of years that we did it, **there was always a letter in the local paper, a letter to the editor from a parent** asking how our school can allow this to happen. I know some people would cringe about that, **and I'm like, "No, that's great! This is great," because almost inevitably, and they wouldn't let it be me, somebody would write an editorial opposing that thought, and give them different thoughts, and so it would continue that conversation, which I think is what you want. You need those opposing voices so that you can continue the conversation and draw more people into it for that. And even if you fail in the sense that you don't convince somebody of something different or you don't change a policy or whatever, I think you bring a lot of awareness and education to issues.

**What motivates and sustains Helen’s activism**

After you advocate for a student and the outcome turns out positive, **it's awesome. You love that. They don't always turn out that way. So yeah that's**
always energizing. That's what keeps us coming back to our offices everyday. It took me a while to see this, but you're always planting seeds, so even if you don't get the outcome that you wanted at that moment, it's amazing how many things come back later, and that's the longevity of the job that lets you know that you've made a difference, or you did something for someone, or you planted a seed that eventually sprouted and may have grown, and you get that feedback along the way sometimes, not always, but the little bits of feedback that you get are enough to keep you motivated. Like I sort of said before, I don't use the word failure, that's a strong word, I'm just too optimistic to look at it as failure. My optimism helps me take those moments when things are rotten and use them as a time to have conversations.

It's more than just my optimism and the satisfaction of positive outcomes though... I mean I live my life pretty true to the things I believe in so it's pretty fulfilling to be able to do that in your everyday work, and to be able to be open, and honest with people about where you're coming from, so that makes your job much more pleasurable because you're authentic. Which I'm not sure everybody has the ability to do that.
Marta’s Story: “The only way people will really learn from me is that if they can feel my love and respect for them”

Marta and I met for both interviews at her home, where she lives with her partner and daughters. I was greeted by the family dog, who stayed close by Marta’s side as she shared with me her experiences as an elementary school counselor advocating for LGBTQ++ students. She is a 61-year old, White, cisgender female person with 25 years of school counseling experience. Marta lives in Pennsylvania, where she works in a K-5 suburban school with a “neutral” school climate, which to Marta means not bad but not great either.

She feels spiritually led on her path of activism and inspired by her Mother, a journalist who Marta describes as a feminist, even if her Mother didn’t identify this way. Marta stands up for what she believes in. Her efforts to create a more equitable and fair work environment have had quite an impact on the community in which she resides and the students with whom she works. This is Marta’s story.

Activist Identity

When I was younger, I was trying to decide what I wanted to do. I care about the Earth, I care about women, I care about all these things, but you can’t do all that. I think I finally realized that the unique person that I am gives me the gifts to do the work for LGBTQ people. In other words, I had an experience that others could learn from.

I think if I were straight, I wouldn’t be called to do LGBTQ work, unless I had a gay sister or whatever. Maybe then I would have been an environmentalist pro or something. I might feel differently but either way, I think I would be active in the
community, it's just part of who I am. My mother was a news journalist when I was growing up, and she didn't know that she was a feminist... she would never have called herself a feminist, but she certainly taught her kids, her three daughters, to go out there and get them. She was very political but never ran for public office. We're all highly motivated and she really modeled that for us.

I didn't have the kind of struggles that a lot of people my age had when coming out. I was just sort of like, “If I wanna love a woman, I'm gonna love a woman.” There certainly were times very early on that I wondered... because there wasn't a lot of social support for the idea at all but I studied Greek in college and fell in love with Lesbos and was just like, "This is a no brainer." You know, I feel spiritually led to do this work, and part of my understanding of God is that God is love, and that even with people with whom we disagree vehemently, I believe that I need to know how to love that person and I need to be able to learn from that person as well. I value talking to people who take an opposite stand from me and I really try to show them love and respect because the only way people will really learn from me is that if they can feel my love and respect for them. If I can hear them, there's a chance that they can hear me. Sure, laws can make a big difference to change how people behave, whether they like it or not, but I don't think that laws alone will change the hearts of people. Changing the hearts is something that will come with people showing love and respect for one another.

Experiences of being an activist for LGBTQ++ students

I sued the school district for benefits for my partner. It was a sex discrimination case that the American Civil Liberties Union took on because the school
district would give benefits to unmarried heterosexual couples, but not to my partner. And as my brother-in-law said, "That’s really weird." Most companies will give them to homosexual couples because they can’t get married, but you have to be married if you’re heterosexual to get the benefits, right? When I did this, I wasn’t just thinking about how my partner and I might benefit, I was also thinking about others. You see, we had started a group for LGBTQ school employees. What did we call it? We called it something to honor those who have gone before us. We only met like two or three times. It was about our rage... about not being honored in the district and not receiving the same benefits as everyone else. So we were talking about how to proceed and I just said, "You know what, I’m suing the district. It’s gonna change, don’t worry about it." I had already been thinking about it, but it just sort of happened at the same time. We were talking about things during that meeting that I was pretty convinced wouldn’t be issues after the lawsuit was settled, which turned out to be true. So I said, “Let’s meet again after the lawsuit”.

So that was a really public thing. Prior to this, I was only out to my friends at work. I’m a Quaker, so honesty and integrity are very strong values that I have. I made a point of never changing my pronouns or anything like that but sometimes I would avoid using pronouns altogether. I didn’t really feel like I was hiding, but... I wasn’t announcing it either. So it was coming out to the community, not only for

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3 The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan national organization that defends the individual rights and civil liberties of all people, especially those who have been historically denied protections of the constitution (“About the ACLU”, 2016).
me, but also for my partner, who's a therapist in town. I think she was more concerned about people finding out that she is a lesbian than I was just because she had some very conservative clients, but I work in two different schools, and when I sued the district, I only had one principal in both schools. I talked to my supervisor and I said, "I just need you to know that I'm doing this because there could be some repercussions." It really was a huge risk. I really trusted my supervisor, so that wasn't an issue. I wasn't really worried about co-workers. I figured my daughter is one to tell people, "Tough shit if you don't like it," and that's sort of how I feel about that.

My biggest concern was if parents would allow me to work with their kids, because that could be problematic. The kind of eerie thing about it was that nobody... nobody said anything to me about it except my closest friends. It was on the front page of the newspaper, and no one said anything. Either people didn’t read the newspaper or they didn’t care. None of the teachers said anything to me. I think they probably didn't know what to say, and it was easier not to say anything. I did, over the course of time, have a number of people say, "Good for you," and so on. There were actually very few repercussions and nobody said I couldn't see their kids because of it or anything like that, and my principal was very supportive.

When I did this, LGBT was not included in any of the school district’s non-discrimination clauses or in any of the harassment policies. So one of the biggest things that happened as a result of this was that all three of the non-discrimination clauses, one for staff, one for students, one for... I can't remember the third one but there are three different ones and three different harassment policies
for different populations in the district. The biggest change that happened as a result of, and the biggest thing that I was looking for, was a change in these policies. Of course the healthcare policy was changed, but also the non-discrimination clauses and the harassment policies were changed. This was huge and to me, what was really, really important. I've had a number of people thank me since then. I remember running into a former third grade student while I was at a parade that my daughter was in. He was in high school then and he was talking to me for the first time since he'd been a third grader. He knew that I was a lesbian and that he was telling me that he was a gay student that had really appreciated what I had done for the school district in terms of the non-discrimination statements and the non-harassment statements. I was thrilled to know that something I had done had touched him deeply, and I had been able to indirectly help him to be very reaffirming of himself.

He is handsome and really, really tall... actually just a stunning looking person. This image is of that moment in time when he's thanking me for the work that I had done, and me just enjoying him and loving seeing the person that he'd become, and knowing that people came before me and I was one of the people that came before him.
Figure 4.2: “My former student”. Marta created this image in response to the visualization exercise.
So all of this happened and then in August of 2014, I got a group of people together who, again, were people that I knew through the school district, people I knew through a Gay Affirming Interfaith Network, people I knew through all these different things that I had worked with, and we got together to create this new alliance in the community. I was the one who actually called that group of people together, so I was very instrumental in creating a welcoming atmosphere here in our town.

I also helped get a PFLAG organization started here but, the turning point for my activism with LGBTQA students would be that this group of us really felt that it was incredibly important for LGBTQ students to have a place where they felt like they were part of the community.4 We don’t want to lose our young people in the community. I feel like the single best thing this alliance has done is serve our young people. I know the high school students really appreciate that we’re doing these things. We now have Drag Bingo four nights a year and there’s this whole slew of LGBTQ high school students who are always there. It’s not only nice that they’re there, but I really appreciate that they appreciate us. You know what I mean? Adults also attend and it’s for everybody, but of course youth are really near and dear to my heart. I gave all the high school students a free round of Bingo, and they really appreciated that. What’s really, really important is creating a public,

4 Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) is the largest family and ally organization in the nation. They offer support, education, and advocacy for the LGBTQ community, with over 400 chapters across all 50 states (“About PFLAG”, 2016).
welcoming space for LGBT people, so that young people feel like they're part of
the community and they're honored and appreciated in our community.

I feel really blessed to live here. There are more conservative people in our
community, but not especially in the schools, at least not at the elementary level
where what I'm teaching is sharing compliments and getting along with each
other. The direct issues come into play much more in middle and high school. I
don't talk about gender identity and sexual orientation issues with kids. I am very
sensitive to the ways that young children feel different from others, even if they
may not understand why themselves, so without actually talking directly about
either of those issues, I really focus on helping children to build their self concepts
through their uniqueness. I also teach classes, socio-emotional intelligence classes,
about honoring one another's diversity, and how boring it would be if we were all
the same, and talking about all kinds of diversity.

I have had kids who have two moms and kids who don't have a dad, so I've been
able to share with them that my daughters have two moms or that my daughters
don't have a daddy there. I'm really familiar with that issue. There are times when
one child calls another kid gay, and I handle that by asking, "Was that intended to be a
compliment, or was that intended to be a put down?" Of course it's always intended
to be a put down, so then I say, "Let's get to the heart of what was the problem
behind why you were giving put downs."

I think you could say that my activism for LGTBQ students really happens
outside of my role as an elementary school counselor. Occasionally there is overlap but
there are lots of people in school who respect the integrity of each child and I
haven't needed to carry that banner alone. Although in my activism, I admit that I haven't had a lot of people jumping up and down to help. There's going to be this whole slew of young people who are still growing up with these remarkably rigid ideas about what's okay regarding sexuality. If I were to dwell on this stuff, I would find it very frustrating, but I don't because we're talking about social change, and if we look at history, it's showing us that social change doesn't happen overnight.

**What motivates and sustains Marta’s activism**

I’ve thought about what I’ll do after I retire and I’ve thought, “Oh, well maybe I’ll just become some sort of a youth counselor or... maybe I’ll become a minister, maybe I’ll become...maybe I'm gonna go and do... be in the peace corps...” I know I will always advocate for LGBTQ people, but in what capacity, I don't really know. My partner and I would like to travel but we'll have to wait and see what our daughters do. Although, I wouldn't be surprised if I were still in this community because I've been here for over 30 years. *When Pennsylvania passed crappy laws or whatever*, people asked me if I was going to move to Massachusetts to get married and stuff like that, and I said, "Somebody has to stay here and advocate for people."

I feel really strongly that I don't need to move to be happy. Yes, I don't like what's going on, but somebody's gotta stay here and make changes here. So I do feel strongly about that, and I think I realize that the reason I'm called to this work is because it's who I am.
Gillian's Story: “It's the underdog thing. You know what I mean?”

Gillian's energy matches that of the dynamic city she works in - Las Vegas, NV. She has worked as a middle school counselor for 10 years, helping to integrate sex education and gender identity into the curriculum. Her energy is paired with a deep commitment to celebrating diversity. In order to foster this inclusive atmosphere, Gillian combines her knowledge base of science and her expertise around the emotions, beliefs, and complexities of human beings. These qualities make up the platform from which she advocates for LGBTQ++ students in her role as a school counselor.

Gillian is a 44-year-old, heterosexual, White female person working in a suburban school setting with grades 5-8. She describes activism as “speaking up and speaking out”. She has made it part of her life's work to help people understand one another, all in the hope of enacting positive change.

Activist Identity

I don't know what it is but I think I put myself in other people's shoes a lot. And when I went to Catholic school, K-8, and they told me the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you want done to you", I don't know, that struck a chord in me. I thought, "Holy cow, of course!" Of course you should treat other people the way you want to be treated. I'm not always great at it let me tell you, this idea of walking a mile in somebody else's shoes just really resonated with me. I do that often, not because anybody tells me to, it just sort of happens. I think I've done that a lot in my life and maybe that's part of what brought me to counseling eventually. I remember being really upset one night, I think it was in 2000, and a man had been drugged behind a truck in Texas for being Black. I was really upset about that and
then somehow the Matthew Shepard story came up and that was huge for me. I don't know why but it was. I just put myself in his mother's shoes and I think the most impactful thing for me was seeing people outside of his memorial with the signs that said, "God hates fags." I just thought, "How in the world could you ever wake up one morning and think that was okay?" After what this person has gone through, after what his family is going through, how by any stretch of the imagination, is that godly or... I just could not, I could never wrap my head around it. I was like, "Oh no, hell no. I am not going to, in any way, shape or form support this at all." At that point I also had a couple of friends come out to me. People I loved couldn't get married and so I was like, “If I get to vote, I'm definitely going to vote that gay partners have rights.”

My degree is in Geology. I was a volcanologist before I became a science teacher, and then I just wanted to go into counseling. I wanted a different kind of relationship with kids. I wanted to work with kids who maybe didn't have anyone else to talk to. Sometimes it's hard when you can't talk to your parents. I don't think I could have on numerous things.

I wanted to be there for those kids that just needed somebody to not judge them or not place a value on what their decisions are, or take it personally what their decisions are, or what their choices are, or who they are. I think that

Matthew Shepard was a 21-year-old University of Wyoming student who was attacked and left to die. His death has become one of the most well-known anti-gay hate crimes in the United States and it catapulted an activist movement leading to the Hate Crimes Prevention Act, a federal law against bias crimes directed at LGBT individuals (Matthew Shepard Foundation, 2015).
sometimes parents are like, "What did I do wrong to have a kid that’s transgender?"

I guess that’s why my personal shift has been from working with gay rights to transgender rights. I feel like there’s enough people on board with gay rights, you know? My gay friends aren’t the underdogs anymore, it’s the transgender folks. Now I’ve got to shift to these kids who are identifying... they’re identifying at a young age, why wouldn’t they?

I know my school isn’t going to give resistance, but I don’t want to be the school that just doesn’t give resistance. I want to be the school that’s inclusive from the beginning. And so, while I’m happy, I think we’re better than a lot of places, I want us to be right there, cutting edge, bleeding edge, particularly when it comes to LGBTQ, I want us to be right there with information. If there’s an article on it, I want to read it. If there’s an LGBTQ conference that happens, I want to go to it. This is absolutely part of my role because my role as a school counselor is really to help all children. In order to help children, I think the biggest thing for kids is they need to feel normal.

When you think about this age... I work with middle school students. You think about puberty, and just how much uncertainty there is with identity. "Who am I? Where do I fit in? Where do I fit in socially?" You’re maturing emotionally, physically, relationally, academically. There are so many different ways to mature, that if you can’t accept yourself or who you are, then it becomes difficult to truly be a member of society later on. You have to be able to first understand self. I’m not saying they are going to figure that out in middle school but the damaging effects of inaccuracy can really start at this age. You’ve got a lot of confident
children, and then they hit middle school. With my own experiences, I remember going through that, and being uncertain about if I was okay. And those are lasting things. Those are lasting, damaging effects on self-worth as an adult. It’s so important for me to help kids to feel normal. **Because what does it mean to really be normal?**

If they exist, then there’s a normalcy in their existence. It’s normal to encounter gay, lesbian, pansexual, transgender. This is normal. This is part of being a human being, just like it’s normal for you to encounter people of different faiths, different races, different ethnicities. It comes down to diversity and embracing diversity.

Honestly, this subject defines part of who I am. It’s very important to me. I think I have to thank this one particular professor for not just sparking my interest, **but really tipping my interest into something that was more.** It was the only class I took in graduate school that **really delved into the subject of sexuality, or transgender, or intersex.** It was this advocacy class where my teacher spent a lot of time defining all of the different terms, the LGBTQ, all of that, and I was so interested in that aspect of the class. I just loved it.

I remember **how just defining terms brought me to a new and different understanding of the variety that exists within humans and people.** It’s not like I didn’t know that people could be bisexual, but it was so awesome to really understand what that meant. It was empowering and I was like, "If this is empowering, maybe it will be empowering to others." When you have understanding, it’s a lot harder to put someone down because it just makes people
pause and think before using a word like “fag”. Education always leads to some kind of positive change. I'm always a big proponent of just educate, educate, educate. And education can just mean, "These are the facts. These people exist. Whether you like it or not, there are people that are transgender." It's the underdog thing. You know what I mean?

I guess I would just call myself open-minded and I try my best to be inclusive because God knows we all have prejudices. I think my open-mindedness is ingrained in me too. I rebelled against that with my mom because she wanted to shame me for being open-minded. but I was like, "No, I'm not doing that, you're wrong." I think that's either inside of people or it's not. I think there's something in a person's DNA code that either allows them to think of things more communally, or think of things as, "Well, I deserve this and you don't."

Although, I'm not sure if I would call myself an activist because calling myself an activist would make me feel as though I was doing everything right. I don’t ever want to feel as though I’ve reached a point where it’s actually possible for me to be doing everything the way it should be done. I always think of activism as doing things on a much larger scale, going to rallies, starting PFLAG or something like that. Maybe in my own way I am an activist but on a much smaller scale. I’ve had lots of kids come through my program on my curriculum, so I guess I’m affecting more people than I think I’m affecting. I guess in my own way I am an activist, but I’m not out there wearing t-shirts or going to rallies. Although my family did recently go to a gay pride parade. So, I don’t know, is that activism? That’s participation. That’s embracing. That’s inclusivity. That’s celebrating diversity. I would love to get to a point in our
society where it doesn't have to be considered activism. I hope we get to a point being inclusive is considered the norm. That's how you should be. If you are not inclusive, if you are not that activist, then there's something wrong.

Experiences of being an activist for LGBTQ++ students

My whole goal and the goal of the school is to be inclusive and make sure all kids feel as though they belong, regardless of what diversity there is. There's been a lot of focus throughout history, at least since the '60s on racial diversity, ethnic diversity, religious diversity, and I'm like, "Well, there's so much more diversity". Last year, the other counselor and I wrote a diversity statement and made sure to include sexuality and gender as part of that statement. At some point in the ‘90s, I started thinking about what diversity really means, and what that includes. We naturally try to make all kinds of diversity part of our culture and our curriculum.

I've been a counselor here 10 years but I've been at the school for 14 years. One of the first things I did coming into the position is get together with the biology teacher to teach a whole unit on human anatomy and human reproduction. It’s essentially sex education so we're talking about heterosexual sex but at the same time, the kids need to understand sort of everything that surrounds sex, because sex is not just biology. It has so much to do with human emotions and all of our beliefs and morals, and how complex we are as humans. I told the teacher, "Well if we're gonna do that, then we need to talk about different kinds of love and different kinds of relationships." At this point, I had just finished graduate school and was inspired by the advocacy class I took. So I had done my own research, and I had put together a whole bunch of resources to present to incoming Teach For America Corps members,
because I was a Teach For America Corps member in '97. I did a presentation for them and then I brought that to Jason, our biology teacher, and I said, "Hey, let's include this piece so that they really understand all the different types of love that there are, or relationships that there are, or let's just define these terms for them."

We give the students these terms because as much as we like to put people in boxes, male, female, check the box... humans aren't that simple. There's this whole world of gray that isn't just black and white. One of the goals of this class is to help students feel normal where they are, so we give students terms to help them define themselves. We made that goal and what has happened since then, that I love by the way, is that I had a student last year who ran up to me excitedly when Sex Ed started and he said, "I'm so excited to take this class and I'm so excited to tell you my sister is pansexual, and she's a junior in high school and she had you three years ago, and because of your class she knew how to identify herself when she figured out what she was." And I was like, "Yes!"

One of the big things we say in that program is, "Everything that we tell you is coming from a biological or a medical perspective but the choices you make with the information we give you should reflect your values, your morals, your faith, your religion, anything your family has put forth." We say that to the parents as well. We tell parents, "This is the curriculum we're teaching. Look, we're defining these terms, we're defining lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual." We are up front about us discussing what it means to be a transvestite versus a drag queen or discussing the meanings of pansexual, bisexual, and cisgender.

I want to walk into a classroom and say, "I see you. I see you for your
difference. I value it, I celebrate it. You are different. Your experiences have been different." If I am truly going to teach my students where they are, I first have to be accepting of who they are, and I have to allow them to be accepting of who they are. In our school, we really believe that you teach children where they are. You teach to their differences. So if you have a different learning style, we want to make sure that we are teaching in a way that is inclusive of different learning styles. If that's how we're teaching, and we're inclusive of different learning styles, then I want us to be inclusive of different people. I see that as the core of counseling. How can you be a counselor if you aren't in tune with the person, and you don't allow the person to be who they are? How? I don't see how you can be a counselor and do that. I just don't.

If I can't handle a parent that's telling me, "This little girl is pushing her pansexual agenda," and if I can't be like, "Oh, well let's talk about that" in a calm way because I'm going to be irritated then I need to refer that parent out. I didn't have to do that but there was a lot that came up for me when that happened and I thought about it quite a bit. What happened was that this young LGBTQ student had read a paper out loud to her class and in this paper, the student included an image of a mom marching to protest her son's beating because he was gay. I felt responsible to have this parent understand that this is not called pushing a pansexual agenda. This is raising awareness to a minority population that has been discriminated against, and continues to be. I had my game face on. I knew that my grammar and my word choice were very important.

I was really invested in the situation and knew that I needed to navigate it and
negotiate it carefully. I was a little bit nervous, because I know that I'm excited and there's an opportunity to take a stand, and I'm excited about that. I was also scared because I'm drawn into things like this emotionally and I'm trying to be logical and professional without tipping the scales into that emotion, and possibly losing this entire situation. There's a lot that hangs in the balance when we don’t completely agree with our parent population and there can be fear of not navigating it well, and the implications for that, not only for the child, but my own job and sort of the attack that sometimes comes with not agreeing.

I was very aware of my own prejudices coming up during that time and I was sort of fighting that prejudice... trying to give her the same gracious space that I would give to my client. My heart has a lot to do with it, you know? There was a pounding and this racing, and it's like swelling, and that's what I keep thinking of.
Figure 4.3: “Heart Colors”. Gillian created this image in response to the visualization exercise.

I was able to talk with that parent, but still...I can't see how you can be a counselor without that. You have to accept people for who they are. You have to. This is why I spend a lot of time thinking and bringing things up to administration – asking, “Can we do this? Can we do that?”. I remember teasing our director of education about referring to us as, “you guys”. I said, “You’re at a school, the majority of your employees are female, quit calling me, ‘You guys’. “ It was just shut door because what we had wanted to discuss was diversity. So we were
talking with him about it and I said, "Well, there's a few things like, why do we have to label our single toilet bathrooms in lower school as boy or girl, why do we need to do that?" The headmaster was just like, "Our parents aren't ready for that."

Even the elementary school counselor was like, "The parents aren't ready for that yet." I was like, "Okay, I get it but if you walk into a kindergarten room, there's one toilet. That's it. One. For everybody. So over the summer, why don't we turn the bathroom in first grade, there's a boy and a girl bathroom, single toilet, why don't we just turn it into restroom for first grade? And then when those kids move to second grade, we change the second grade toilets and then the third grade and then the fourth grade, and it's a gradual shift that the parents don't notice." They didn't think it was important enough and that's just so disappointing. It's not the elementary counselor, it's administration, but her steps are always a little more conservative than mine. I don't know. I guess I ruffle more feathers.

During this same meeting, I also brought up a time when the children in early childhood had a play and I noticed there were girl costumes or boy costumes. I said, "Well, can the music teacher simply present them with costumes and the children can choose which costume they want to wear, or can they consider making costumes that aren't so... so gender specific? But maybe even having some that are somewhere in between?"

There has been so much shift in administration that it's been challenging. I mean, I've been doing that I'm supposed to be doing as a counselor, but I don't feel as though I'm out there in the community, and making it a part of my life. If I do speak out or advocate outside of the school community, that affects my ability to work within
this community and at this school, because I don't think I can go out there and be a true LGBT activist and then still be employed here because it would show such bias. I try to be really careful with my position, with what I've been charged to do. It doesn't always work out well. We're dealing with some very powerful parents and very influential people. I'm constantly upsetting them for one reason or another and it reminds me to be very careful and very deliberate. I don't want to compromise what I can do here because I do think it has lasting effects.

What motivates and sustains Gillian’s activism

I think a lot of my colleagues are supportive of children, and I always remind myself that my client is the student. My client is not their parents. My client is not the school. My client is not the administration. So often, that conflicts in my job because I become unpopular. Unpopular with the parent, unpopular with administration, and sometimes unpopular with the teachers. But, something that resonates with me from my graduate program is the importance of my client being the student, and being an advocate for the student.

When I think of advocating for LGBT youth, I know that some of my clients will fall within that category, and sometimes I will have clients who identify, or don’t yet identify, but will, and there's a need to protect that hidden minority. Some things are obvious, like color, but LGBT is not obvious. Sometimes, religion can be obvious, or supported from the parents. You don't often find a child who identifies with a certain faith that doesn't have the support of their parents. You can find an LGBT youth who doesn't have the support of their family. I've come across that with the transgender youth and it's really heartbreaking.
I see it as part of my role to protect my client, the student, who may not have anyone else protecting them or caring for them in this way. I take that very seriously because they're kids. So much happens to them that can be damaging and they need a nonjudgmental advocate and I'm unwilling to give up on them, on the innocence that's there. I know they're resilient which is awesome, but minimizing damage, allowing them to move forward through life feeling that they can be confident in who they are, it's so important to me. It's allowing them to be confident in who they are and honestly, maybe it's because I never felt that way.

I do things because I feel that they're the right things to do but there's always somebody who doesn't think I acted quickly enough and there's always the opposite side that thinks I acted too harshly or without enough information. It's rare that I find somebody who says, "Oh, thank you so much for handling that perfectly." Being a counselor who really puts forth everything they've got can be demoralizing on so many levels. Caring so much is exhausting, trying to do the right thing all the time, for all people involved is exhausting. Trying to make the right decisions, when there are so many factors involved in every single decision is exhausting. Pleasing everyone is exhausting. No matter how hard you try, it doesn't work out, but for some reason I keep trying. I'm reminded of my tenacity sometimes because I'm unwilling to give up.
Tori’s Story: “My agenda was to do whatever I could to help the school and its culture be more inclusive and affirming and supportive of LGBTQ kids.”

From my own experience, I know that school counselors are often being pulled in multiple directions at one time. I observed this tugging for Tori’s attention as she carved out time for us to speak during a busy week in which she was also being interviewed by a TV network regarding her efforts to support LGBTQ++ students. Tori is a 46-year-old, White, cisgender female person employed as a school social worker at an urban high school in Kentucky. She told me that she does the traditional work of a school counselor, including individual and small group counseling, psychosocial evaluations, behavior intervention planning, and crisis intervention.

Tori has been working in this capacity for 8 years, transitioning from working with K-8 students after 5 years to work with students in grades 9-12. Tori wears many metaphorical hats, including that of a GSA faculty advisor, a LGBTQ workshop facilitator, and a board member for a national organization devoted to LGBTQ issues.

Activist Identity

I grew up in a home with parents who were extremely homophobic. Although, at the time I didn’t know that’s what it was called. I was a kid. I didn’t know what homophobia was. I only knew because I later found out in a counseling session that the reason my mother never hugged me, never kissed me, and never told me she loved me throughout my entire childhood is because she thought it would make me gay. On one hand, I was really relieved to hear that because I realized that her withholding of affection was nothing about me as a person, but more about her ignorance and lack of education. On the other hand, it kind of catapulted me into a
world of wanting to understand, of wanting to be educated, of wanting to be affirming and inclusive of all people regardless of race, religion, and LGBTQ status.

Not only were my parents homophobic, but my father was extremely abusive. I didn’t understand how my mom could have gotten so far off track to let this domestic violence occur to her and withhold affection and all these things. I wanted to understand how my dad got to be who he was. I was so fascinated that my first career choice was actually to be a neurologist. I wanted to study the brain and understand how the brain controls these thought patterns and these emotions. I wondered, “How can somebody go so wrong?” So I threw myself into psychology when I was in college but when I graduated with my bachelors in psychology, I realized you really can’t do much with a Bachelors in psychology. I decided not to get my Master’s in psychology because I didn’t want to go on and get a doctorate or do private practice counseling. That’s why I chose to get my Master’s in two tracks - mental health and community based.

I started as a child and family therapist, sometimes seeing kids who had mental health concerns related to their sexual orientation or gender identity, but not very often. Families or the child would come into my office and I was educated and willing to work with them but I wasn’t an activist at the time. It wasn’t until about 2012, when things were hitting me both professionally and personally. I was working as a social worker at the middle school and I had a child who was transgender and Hispanic. The mother was very religious and very rejecting of this child. This student was hospitalized many times for attempting suicide and
her parents didn’t... It didn’t change their opinion.

Around this same time, my own daughter was having issues at school. She had sexual orientation and gender identity issues herself and had a very hard time at the high school. One of my daughter’s best friends committed suicide over gender identity issues. I deal with suicides all of the time because that’s part of my profession but this was a child who I knew really well and because of the family rejection issues she was struggling with for so long, she committed suicide. It was absolutely devastating not only for me, but obviously for my daughter.

My activism really just comes from a combination of things – my experiences of growing up, seeing the number of kids coming out and dealing with challenges without support increase every year, and my personal experiences. I was also practicing to be the kind of person I wanted to be. I threw myself into psychology and social work and wanting to be educated. I was like, "Something needs to change, this is not okay for these kids to be suffering at the hands of their parents." So I think that’s when it started, education turning into activism.

Experiences of being an activist for LGBTQ++ students

During my last couple of years in the middle school, I saw such an increase in the number of LGBTQ kids that I counseled attempting suicide over sexual orientation and gender identity issues. That's all I do is counseling, mental health counseling, and I saw that it was such a pervasive issue. When I had the opportunity to come to high school, getting an active GSA going was first and foremost for me. My agenda was to do whatever I could to help the school and its culture be more inclusive and affirming and supportive of LGBTQ kids. That's what really inspired
everything from then to just two years later, now.

We're paving the way for other schools because the other principals will call our principal when they have transgender issues or LGBTQ issues and say, "I'm assuming you've already had this situation, how did you handle this?" They come to us as being that role model opinion. A lot of the schools in Kentucky don't have GSAs or support people that the kids can talk to. Kids are much more bullied, they're much more closeted for fear of what would happen. I would say we're probably three years or so ahead of other high schools. I know it doesn't sound very humble if I said it was because of me, but I think that's what people would say to you.

We recently made a really cool video in GSA, I'm the faculty advisor. Our trans kids reached out to local medical professionals in our community to encourage them to start a trans clinic here. Right now, our trans kids have to drive all the way to Cincinnati to get their care. They've even given the clinic a name even though it's not in existence yet. The video is really powerful and really moving.

I also just started doing these lunch and learns for teachers and support staff, which are great. The first one I ever did, teachers came during their planning periods and learned about all things LGBTQ - terminology, statistics, how to support students in their classrooms who might identify as LGBTQ, what to say to them and what not to say. I do lots of other trainings and workshops too. Just a couple weeks ago, I spoke at a training for all of our school district health workers and nurses because they didn't have any training on LGBTQ health risks. Oh, and you know I'm also on the board of GLSEN so we deal with all of the current policy
issues. We get requests sometimes from other school districts to go in and do different trainings and things like that. I'm nationally certified to be a presenter and facilitator on LGBTQ issues. I had to go through this whole training thing and it was pretty intense. I had no education on LGBTQ issues in graduate school so that's another thing that inspires me to teach. When I was in school, there was no LGBTQ 101 or anything like that. We did have a human sexuality class in my Master's program and the professor did have a transgender person come in to the class. It was just this one class. We didn't even really talk about anything other than just hearing this person's story.

I have noticed that since I’m the one who teaches at these workshops, there is the risk of making myself a target in my school or even in the community. There has been finger-pointing, eye-rolling, and people asking if I’m gay or what my agenda is, instead of really investing themselves in being educated for the purposes of supporting students. Outing myself has put me at risk of discrimination. I never liked to share personal stories and it's something that I have never really felt comfortable doing until about 2012, when I realized that sometimes the most effective intervention possible is done through story telling. Sometimes you can have all the policies in the world and all the scientific research, and all whatever. It's the personal stories that really can make an impact and can change people's thinking, you know? I had to let my guard down a little bit when it came to self disclosure. Like I said, in sharing those parts of me, about how I was raised and about my daughter, to be the most effective clinician that I could be. It's being genuine, it's being real, and the kids need that. They need to be able to connect with that, and
not think that I’m just doing this because I’m getting paid to do it.

**What motivates and sustains Tori’s activism**

The kids. I don’t know what they would do without having a GSA here. I continue to this for the kids because I still have kids who are suffering. It is so important to me that I support the students who have very frequent suicidal ideation and are self-harming or using substances because of the rejection that they’re receiving at home. They need to feel supported here. Especially our trans kids, who sometimes have to vacillate between these two worlds of being at school and then having to go home and it's a complete flip. Maybe it’s a transman who is called by his male name at school by teachers and friends but then he goes home, and has to be his girl self again. Even to the point with parents making him go to church and wear dresses. And the emotional toll that takes on the kids, how do they do that day-in and day-out?

The highly rejecting families have very serious consequences, like using substances, self-harming, wanting to commit suicide, or not coming to school because they’re just so depressed. I figured the least I can do is make sure that these kids spend more time here at school than they do at home and make sure school is a supportive and affirming environment. It's a difficult thing when the parents are rejecting of their LGBTQ child because I do have respect for everybody's opinion. The only time I draw a line is if that opinion causes direct mental, physical, emotional harm to another human being. Everybody is going to have an opinion, and people are raised how they're raised, and these things become ingrained in people. But for parents who are highly rejecting, they think, "No, I'm doing this for
my kid. I'm protecting my kid from this homosexual world that's gone awry."

Honestly, it's exhausting work as a mental health provider with this kind of niche. It's mentally exhausting. In one day, I can have a student in here who is trans, had top surgery, is on hormones, is completely male, and got the name change...a fully transitioned kid. Parents are accepting, everything's great, they're thriving now, right? Then an hour later, I can have one of my trans kids come in, wanting to kill herself, and her mom is saying that she's Satan and she's going to hell and so am I now... It's exhausting.

At this point, I have seen things that are just so unbelievable and traumatic that I do a really good job of not taking things home with me. When I get home, I'm just exhausted. I don't ruminate about my day at work or think, "Oh my God this kid...," or anything like that. I watch TV, hang out with the dog, take my daughter to gymnastics, just do all the things in life that you need to do. I'm a single parent so I do all the things that I have to do and then I just crash. I admit that I don't do such a great job with self-care but I do a lot of meditation, especially before I go to bed at night. I self-reflect and try to get a good night's sleep so I feel calm and ready for the next day.
Dedication
Inspiration
Motivation
Vision
Teamwork
Leadership
+ Persistence

= SUCCESS

Figure 4.4: “Tori’s Success Image”. Tori created this image in response to the visualization exercise.
Illustrated Narrative

I asked the case synopses and transcripts, “What sequences of events and what personal meanings are common among cases?” (Fischer & Wertz, 2002, p. 9). The illustrated narrative is a concise account of these findings, organized by commonalities, and includes excerpts from the transcriptions that support these similarities. The illustrated narrative in this study differs from Fischer and Wertz’s method in that I chose to notate who the excerpts belong to in an effort to recognize each person’s unique story. I also infuse a discussion of the common findings within the illustrated narrative.

The three commonalities that materialized from the data analysis were a) Identifying with the LGBTQ++ community, b) Pattern of recognizing oppression and working towards change, and c) Education as a form of activism. Within the common finding of “Identifying with the LGBTQ++ community”, participants share in having personal experiences that compelled them to advocate for the LGBTQ++ community. Three of four participants identify as a sexual minority, while one participant identifies as heterosexual. The role of their experiences in triggering their career trajectories is discussed in the first theme of “identifying with the LGBTQ++ community”. The “pattern of recognizing oppression and working towards change” finding refers to each participant’s ability to recognize the presence of oppression and their desire to eradicate the oppression, thus facilitating positive change. The third common finding to emerge from the data is “Education as a form of activism.” Participants frequently cited instances in which they advocated for LGBTQ++ students via education. This education includes education for students, others, and self.
Common Finding 1: Identifying with LGBTQ++ community

Each of the participants mentioned personal experiences they had relating to sexual minority and gender identity. These experiences, in part, triggered their activism for LGBTQ issues, specifically. Helen spoke of identifying as a lesbian, which then allowed her the ability to identify with LGBTQ++ students in a new way.

“My activism for LGBT issues was really a result of me finding myself after being divorced and in a lesbian relationship.”

“Then we, obviously, in the counseling office, saw LGBT students who had needs and I could start identifying with that.”

She added how she recognizes other people’s unawareness when it comes to the limitations that some laws place on LGBTQ individuals, but sees herself as a tool to affect change because she can share her own story or reframe that unawareness as an opportunity to educate others.

“...but now we have North Carolina and Mississippi and some of those things, and then you have political candidates that you’re not sure if they’ll take all of those rights away. And so I think my optimism can be helpful in saying... Because I do think this is the time then that you can have those conversations, take those things that are happening to you... Because I think advocacy and activism is all about telling your own story. So teaching them to say, ‘Well this is how it impacts me,’ and spreading that is really, really important. Just in my own office, I work with all straight people, and although they’re very supportive
there... Like North Carolina, they weren't aware of what that law meant and they weren't aware of how it feels for someone like me to travel in North Carolina and feel the impact of those kind of changes. Or they're not aware of the fact that gay people can still be fired from their jobs because there's no state protection or federal protection for that. So it's interesting, but you have to take those moments when things are rotten and use that as a time to have conversations."

Marta also shared that because of her lesbian identity, she felt she had something to offer others because of what she could teach them about the experience of being a lesbian in this world.

"I think I finally realized that the unique person that I am gives me the gifts to do the work for LGBTQ people, okay? In other words, I had an experience that others could learn from."

"I think I realize that the reason that I'm called to this work is because it's who I am. And that if, in fact... If I had been straight, probably I wouldn't be doing LGBTQ work."

Gillian was impacted by her gay friends who did not have the same rights as heterosexual individuals.

"At that point I had a couple of friends come out to me..."

"And boy, does that just piss me off that my friend has to feel this, like he's done something wrong, when he hasn't."
She also reflected on her experience of being in middle school and not knowing for sure what was normal and what wasn’t. She didn’t feel like she could always talk to her parents about things while growing up. This is one of the reasons Gillian decided to go into school counseling and it has influenced her in co-teaching a social sexuality class to students in grades 5-8 because she wants students to feel supported, no matter how they may identify.

“You’ve got a lot of confident children, and then they hit middle school. And with my own experiences, I remember going through that, and being uncertain with if I was okay. And those are lasting things.”

“I wanted a different relationship with kids that I felt maybe didn’t have anybody to talk to or weren’t sure of... I don’t know. Sometimes it’s hard, you can’t talk to your parents. I don’t think I could’ve on numerous things.”

Tori described being raised by homophobic parents and the career path that put her on because she so desperately wanted to understand her mother’s choice to remain in a home with domestic violence and her mother’s lack of affection towards her. Tori discussed her daughter’s struggles with sexual orientation and gender identity and the heartbreak she experienced when her daughter’s friend committed suicide. She indicated on the demographic questionnaire that she is uncertain of her own sexual orientation, having been in a heterosexual relationship for most of her life but in a lesbian relationship for the past four years.
“The personal experience obviously, is my daughter and her experiences, as well as the fact that I grew up in a home with parents that were extremely homophobic.”

“It was a combination of my professional experience and seeing the kids increasing every year, coming out and dealing with all these challenges and not having the support they needed.”

“My activism part of me really just comes from, like I said, it’s dual. It comes from seeing these kids struggle also with my own personal experiences.”

Each of these experiences is unique in its own way but what is common among them is that they helped serve as a jumping off point for engaging in efforts that help the LGBTQ++ population. John Dewey (1938) aptly writes in a seminal piece that every experience prepares the individual for later experience, which will allow opportunities for reconstruction of experience, growth, and continuity. In discussing this cumulative effect of experience, he explains:

If an experience arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense to carry a person over dead places in the future, continuity works in a very different way. Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward. (p. 38)

In examining the role of experience in each of the participant’s stories, I wondered why they felt so moved by these intimate and formative events in their lives that they choose to attempt change, time and time again. I surmise that there are a lot of individuals with similar experiences, yet not everyone is assuming a mantle of activism. This aligns with
previous research suggesting that some school counselors do embrace the role of change agent while others resist this call from professional organizations (Lewis, Toporek, & Ratts, 2010). There appears to be a differing scope of social justice advocacy among counselors (Roysircar, 2009; Weinrach & Thomas, 2004). To unpack this inquiry a bit more, I turn to the next major theme.

**Common Finding 2: Pattern of recognizing oppression and working towards change**

The participants in this study have a history of recognizing unjust practices and often taking individual or collective action to facilitate positive change. Helen is authentically passionate about various social justice issues. While LGBTQ++ issues are “near and dear” to her heart, she is also committed to animal rights, women rights, politics, and environmental issues.

“I think I gravitate toward the whole feminist movement and the sexual assault and awareness. I definitely have been very supportive and have done some marches in those kind of areas. I’m just interested in people being aware of those kind of things.”

She has self-identified as an activist for the last 10 years but she shifted a lot of that activist energy to LGBTQ++ issues when her identity as a lesbian surfaced.

“Lots of topics get me excited. In my personal life, I’d say in the last ten years I feel like I’ve personally tried to be more of an activist.”

“I think that once I realized that I had some personal passion for something and could do that through my job. . .”
“Yeah, I think that once I realized that I had my own personal issue, not that I wasn’t always an advocate for students...”

Helen’s passion for equality and optimism are characteristics that sustain her activism. She spoke of negotiating conflict with parents and working against the school system at times. Helen views such dilemmas as part of her role as a school counselor and suggests that more school counselors should be engaging in activism within their work.

“I do think school counselors need to argue and fight the hard fight. I feel like we’re constantly swimming upstream against the system, that can make things not fair and equitable for students... And I love that! I’ve always loved that. I like swimming upstream.”

“I think school counselors should be voices of... well, they should be advocates always for their students, I mean, that’s their job – the activism issue. I think maybe that depends on the personality of the person, the reasons why they took that job in the first place or were interested in that career. I have colleagues who are not activists in any way, shape, or form and are great school counselors. It’d be nice if there would be more, I think counselors stand in, they’re in a really good spot to be an activist because they have that wide angle lens on students and the system that the students are going through. We just get to know... We kinda know everything. You know, all the rules and
regulations, all the classes, the curriculum, the teachers, the faculty, the staff, we get to know all the facets, so they're in a really prime spot to lead any kind of change or make a difference in that school community, and so their voice can be pretty important. If they can carve it, or if the community can offer up a spot for them.”

Helen spoke of coming up against resistance when asking for LGBTQ related initiatives from administration.

“I think it’s much more risky to be creative, to think outside the box, to ask for things that we’re not doing. I wouldn’t ask for some of those things now that I did 15 years ago because of the feel of the climate, because the administrative climate and just the whole feeling that schools are under public eye and under scrutiny.”

While the timing and context of the school climate is important to consider when initiating change, Helen firmly believes that encountering pushback is one of the best opportunities to have further conversations, to keep asking until you get a yes.

“You need those opposing voices so that you can continue the conversation and draw more people into it for that. And even if you fail in the sense that you don’t convince somebody of something different or you don’t change a policy or whatever, I think you bring a lot of awareness and education to issues.”

Helen is not the only participant who spends her time advocating for various causes. Marta’s life story includes a politically active, feminist Mother, responsible for
teaching her to take action and challenge the status quo. Marta is impassioned by a variety of issues. She believes that if she identified as straight, she may not be as devoted to LGBTQ issues but she would most certainly be an activist anyway.

“I care about the Earth, I care about women, I care about all these things, but you can’t do all that”

With Marta’s “go out there and get them” attitude and her history of working to establish LGBTQ resources in the community, it is no surprise that she found herself navigating oppressive structural barriers to equality at the institutional level, as she advocated for her and her partner to receive the same benefits that her heterosexual co-workers receive. She confronted this adversity initially by forming a group with other LGBTQ co-workers who felt disempowered.

“We only met like two or three times. But it was about our rage, about not being honored in the district and not receiving the same benefits as everyone else. They were talking about how they could proceed, and I just said, ‘You know what, I’m suing the district. It’s gonna change, don’t worry about it.’

What is especially notable about Marta’s efforts here is that she wasn’t just thinking about herself and her partner, she was also intentionally working to change the non-discrimination clauses within the school district – clauses that did not protect LGBTQ++ students and staff from being harassed or discriminated against. These clauses were amended as a result of Marta’s case against the school district. She spoke frequently of the LGBTQ community groups she has spearheaded over the years, expressing that her motivation for doing so includes her desire to create a welcoming
atmosphere in town for LGBTQ++ students.

“It was incredibly important for LGBTQ students to have a place where they felt like they were part of the community, in terms of being able to not lose our young people here ... So, to me, I feel like that's probably the single best thing that we've done.”

Marta’s activism within the community and her efforts to make the non-discrimination policies at her school more inclusive are examples of the community collaboration domain and the systems advocacy domain within the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis et al., 2002). However, it is important to note that she did not interact with the community through her role as an elementary school counselor. She helped to facilitate groups that could be a resource for high school students outside of her work but I believe her response to what she saw as a barrier for LGBTQ++ high school students in the larger community is worthy of falling under the domain of community collaboration. She used her knowledge of specific difficulties in the environment to serve students by co-creating groups available for interpersonal relations, support, and communication (Lewis et al., 2002).

Tenets of the systems advocacy domain include identifying environmental factors imposing on students’ development, analyzing sources of political power and social influence within the system, and providing data that show the urgency for change (Lewis et al., 2002). Marta identified factors that were capable of interfering with students’ development when she noted that absence of protection for LGBTQ++ students in her district’s anti-discrimination clauses. She also negotiated political power and inequality within the system when she advocated for her partner to receive the
same benefits as heterosexual partners. There is an emphasis on transformation in the process and outcome. This aligns with critical social theory in that the participants witnessed injustices in everyday relationships and systems and sought to transform them (Dant, 2003).

Gillian’s desire to transform unjust situations and social structures in regard to the LGBTQ++ community is unique in this study because Gillian is the only participant who identifies as heterosexual.

“I don’t know what it is but I think I put myself in other people’s shoes a lot. And when I went to Catholic school, K to eight, and when they told me the Golden Rule, ‘Do unto others as you want done to you’, I don’t know, that struck a chord in me.”

She spoke of being empathetic, a quality she believes is innate in her and can be in others as well.

“Some of these things are ingrained in you… I rebelled against that with my mom… she wanted to shame me for being open-minded. I was just like, ‘No. Not doing that.’ But I can see how somebody else might be like, ‘Okay, let’s just not talk about it.’ But I was like, ‘No, I’m not doing that, you’re wrong.’ That’s something… I think that’s inside of you.”

“I kind of think your genetics can define your race and we can see how you’re born gay or heterosexual. I think you can be born Republican and Democratic.”
“I think there’s something in that code that either allows you to think of things more communally, or think of things as, ‘Well, I deserve this and you don’t.’”

She describes herself as always wanting to help out the “underdog” and of being deeply affected when she bore witness to violence against others. Similar to what Helen and Marta described, Gillian seems to have a sense of her actions having a far-reaching and resounding impact. While she advocates for all students, Gillian feels especially fervent about advocating for transgender students because she thinks of this group of individuals as being the “underdogs” now.

“My gay friends aren’t the underdogs anymore. It’s the transgender folks so far. So, I’ve shifted. ‘You’ve got enough people to take care of you now, Eric and Matt.’ Now I’ve gotta shift to these kids that are identifying... They’re identifying at a young age, why wouldn’t they?”

Gillian has a lot of emotions wrapped up in seeing members of the LGBTQ++ community harassed, discriminated against or hurt. She takes these emotions and uses them as motivation for her activism in the form of education, which brings us to the next theme.

**Common Finding 3: Education as a form of Activism**

All of the participants described the ways in which they use education to foster awareness and inform people about LGBTQ++ individuals and issues. This form of activism was demonstrated by educating students, others, and self. Participants spoke frequently about engaging in education as activism and the importance of remaining
current and competent when it comes to matters related to LGBTQ++ youth.

**Educating students.** Participants educated students proactively through teaching about LGBTQ++ issues and also when they intervened after hearing negative remarks regarding sexual orientation or gender identity. One of the first things Gillian did coming into her role as middle school counselor was modify the curriculum in a sex education course to include information on “different kinds of love and different kinds of relationships”. She felt inspired by her recent graduate course on advocacy and made sure to spend time defining LGBTQ terms to her new students. Gillian is straightforward when telling parents about topics that will be covered in this course. She proactively sends out a letter to all parents letting them know what will be taught in their child’s sex education class.

“We say that to the parents as well, we’re like, This is the curriculum we’re teaching. ‘So that’s where we come from when we teach it. We say, ‘Look we’re defining these terms, we’re defining lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual.’ What does it mean to be a transvestite versus a drag queen, versus . . . What do all these things mean, really? What does pansexual mean, bisexual, what is cisgender?”

Marta explained that she does not bring up sexual orientation and gender identity as an elementary school counselor because she doesn’t believe this to be an appropriate topic to bring up, but she does teach students about diversity.

“I’m not gonna talk about gender identity and sexual orientation issues with kids. Though, I think I am very sensitive to the ways that young children feel
different from others, even if they may not understand why themselves, and so without actually talking directly about either of those issues, I think I really focus on helping children to build their self concepts through their uniqueness.

“I teach classes, social /emotional intelligence classes, so the others always assume class is about teaching about honoring one another’s diversity, and how boring it would be if we were all the same, and talking about all kinds of diversity. I think probably one thing that has helped kids is when they . . . I have had kids who have two moms, and kids who don’t have a dad, so I’ve been able to share with them that my daughters have two moms or that my daughters don’t have a daddy there, and I’m really familiar with that issue.”

Marta said she does intervene at the elementary level when children use the term “gay” as a putdown.

“When one child calls another kid gay, the way I really have come to deal with it is simply by saying, ‘Was that intended to be a compliment, or was that intended to be a putdown?’ Of course, it’s always been a putdown, so then I would say, ‘Let’s get to the heart of what was the problem behind why you were giving put downs. Calling people names is not okay, no matter what the name is.’ I really haven’t gone into, at all, focusing on the word gay itself, mostly because when kids use it at that age, it’s not about sexuality.”

She also expressed that she hasn’t received any training or education on how to counsel elementary students who may experience issues related to sexual orientation and
gender identity. Although, I want to note that just because a student identifies as LGBTQ++, this does not mean the student will need counseling.

“I think probably in high school, it’s probably also not really about sexuality. It’s usually just about giving somebody a put down, so I feel pretty comfortable with that. So those are the ways that I think that I’ve dealt with that issue, although I have to admit that there’s not exactly any training that I could get on this issue. How do you counsel elementary children about these issues? There isn’t any training there out there, anywhere, so that’s... I can’t say that I’m right about these things, I just really have to follow my lead.”

Both Helen and Tori talked about collaborating with students through their roles as GSA advisors and also about being role models to the students. Helen uses moments of receiving pushback from administration or others as an opportunity to teach students how to respond in such a situation. She is prudent in the sense that she knows students who are marginalized may encounter a similar kind of adversity later on in life, post-high school, thus she encourages students to turn their frustration into advocacy. Tori shared that she took her GSA students to a LGBTQ youth summit and helped students create a video to help raise awareness of transgender issues. Again, this is a form of honoring students’ voices and teaching them advocacy skills.

**Educating school personnel and parents.** Participants discussed their role in educating school personnel, such as teachers and administrators, about sexual orientation and gender identity as it pertains to LGBTQ++ youth. Tori and Helen lead
workshops for school personnel, sometimes collaborating with students when doing so. Helen and the LGBTQA Alliance student members at her school led a National Day of Silence and created Safe Space stickers that teachers could choose to put on their classroom door.

“The LGBT alliance put together a packet all about what gender identity is, how to be an ally in your classroom, some terms that teachers could know, and we made safe space stickers... and put that in everybody’s mailboxes to try to educate teachers a little bit and bring some awareness to gender identity issues and those kind of things.”

Helen also said that part of her role in advocating for LGBTQ students is consulting. Other school counselors or administrators in the district will call her to discuss how to proceed with LGBTQ related concerns as they arise.

“Elementary principals or middle school principals, or counselors will call me and say, ‘Can you come and help talk?’ or, ‘Do you know about this?’ or, ‘Can you... Just because I’ve had a lot of experience with kids.’”

Helen also consults with parents:

“We have some students that identified as non–gender conforming in elementary school, and our elementary schools did a really great job, and I got to do a lot of work with those parents and some consulting. And they’re coming to middle school age and I think our school district is very concerned about what’s going to happen to those students and how they’re going to be treated, and how teachers treat them because you suddenly go from a little elementary
classroom to 300 kids in a middle school, and then you come to a 600 per class, 2,400 students at the high school.”

She shared of recognizing her coworkers’ lack of awareness when it comes to the impact of laws that do not protect LGBTQ individual rights, a community that she now considers herself a part of, but did not always. Helen shares her own story in an effort to educate co-workers.

“I work with all straight people, and although they’re very supportive there . . .

Like North Carolina, they weren’t aware of what that law meant and they weren’t aware of how it feels for someone like me to travel in North Carolina and feel the impact of those kind of changes. Or they’re not aware of the fact that gay people can still be fired from their jobs because there’s no state protection or federal protection for that.”

“So that was the beginning for me, it was coming out and telling my own story that really sparked it, and realizing how difficult that is and how it really, it was really my responsibility. I had to really own it.”

Tori facilitates “lunch and learns” for teachers to attend during their planning periods. She said teachers learn about:

“…all things LGBTQ, terminology, statistics, how to support students in their classrooms that might identify as LGBTQ, what to say to them, what not to say.”

Tori is a nationally certified presenter through an LGBTQ organization, which means
that she also gets requests from other school districts to facilitate LGBTQ trainings for school staff. Artifacts related to Tori’s professional development presentations show that she educates beyond the school level. She presents on topics such as creating an LGBTQ inclusive school environment, LGBTQ education and awareness, and addressing the needs of sexual minority and gender expansive youth to teachers, administration, support staff, social workers, school counselors, health workers, community mental health professionals, and a cohort of Master’s of Education students at a local university.

Marta also mentioned her role as a consultant to teachers who ask her if they should be doing anything differently with children who don’t conform to gender norms. She tells them,

“No. There isn’t anything you should be doing differently for this child. If an issue comes up and you’re not sure how to respond to it, do your best and ask me. You can always come back to it.”

She advises teachers to be open-minded, respectful, and fair:

“Respect them as people, help them be good learners, help your other children to know, treat them no differently than the others, and help them treat them no differently than others.”

Gillian always makes herself available to teachers and school staff members when they have questions about supporting the needs of LGBTQ students:

“I just feel like education always leads to some kind of what I consider to be positive change, whether that’s... You’re against abortion? Great. Rather than
preaching anti-abortion, why not bring sex education into a system so that you prevent unwanted pregnancies in the first place, and then you don’t ever have to come to that difficult decision of whether to abort. And that’s kind of my . . . I don’t know. I’m always a big proponent of just educate, educate, educate. And education can just mean, These are the facts. These people exist.”

**Education of self.** Participants all agreed that training school personnel is important and necessary in order to create a safe and welcoming school climate. They were diligent to educate themselves first in order to reach a level of competence in which they would be in a position to educate others. Each participant stated that they do their own research and self-initiated training. Tori described the training for her to become a nationally certified facilitator was intense, but entirely self-initiated, as all of her training is. She spoke about attending conferences every year and reading materials online.

“They have a national conference every year. I’ve gone every year since that they’ve started . . . I’m the one doing the educating to make sure that I’m current with what I’m teaching in my workshops and things, I just do a lot of reading, usually online . . . I basically just do a lot to keep myself as on top of things as possible.”

Helen’s self-initiated education echoes that of Tori’s:

“Just the amount of reading, and research, I do myself . . . and going to as many conferences and trainings as I can.”
Gillian attends conferences when she can but does not receive funding to do so. She also said colleagues will send her related materials, and a lot of her research is prompted by students’ questions.

“It’s being interested in it, and I think people know I’m interested in it. And so if they come across an article, they’ll always send it to me. If I’m watching BBC News, I’m gonna gravitate to what is trending right now with transgender issues. I do a lot of research when I teach the sex ed class. So last year we taught seventh grade social sexuality, because I teamed with a history teacher.. and I think once you start diving into that world of just human equality, whether it’s females or sexuality or whatever it is, all of this stuff sort of starts to come up.”

“I love the questions the students give us. Their questions prompt research. We had students ask us, ‘Well, how can you tell if someone’s transgender?’ And so we found a Brazilian model who had stolen her grandmother’s hormone pills and started taking them as a pre-teen, and was able to stop some of the changes associated with genetically being male, and she’s a model now and she looks very much female. And so that brings us to hormone therapy conversations. That’s kind of it. I think it’s just a self-interest. I haven’t really done anything formal.”

“I don’t work with any organizations here in town, but if I do go to a
conference... I tend to gravitate towards workshops that will talk about or mention LGBTQ youth.”

Participants often reconciled knowledge with change in order to improve their school environments. They were keenly aware that their actions can help create a more just and fair world and shared in their abilities to recognize oppression and challenge the status quo. This realization often led to their desire to find an alternative that would improve the human condition and ensure that those who were oppressed were included and treated equitably.

Collage

The process of creating the collage (see Figure 4.5) helped me to construct deeper meaning from the data and push the analysis even further by synthesizing the data. The physical practice of making a collage involved painting and layering fabric followed by recombining portions of artifacts, interview data, and magazine images/words. A great deal of thought went into the positioning of images and text, what colors to use, and how to convey meaning from the data. The juxtaposition and layering helped me to observe the data in a way that unearthed new meaning and solidify findings from the case synopses and illustrated narratives.

I began by looking through magazines and cutting out images that resonated with the data. Next, I laminated copies of the participants’ images and gathered all of the artifacts together. I allowed the process to happen organically, mindfully noting what surfaced throughout. I aimed to give the canvas various textures and layers in order to symbolize multifaceted school systems that are often complicated by many different viewpoints and interests. The collage presented in this dissertation allows for
the reader/viewer to perceive their own meaning, thus creating a continuous state of reflection (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008).

Figure 4.5: Collage created by researcher to present findings.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insight into the activist identity development of school counselors and learn more about their experiences advocating for LGBTQ++ students. Participants represented suburban and urban school settings and engaged in activism at varying levels. Unique to this study was the use of arts-based narrative inquiry to explore, analyze, and better understand school counselor activism for and with LGBTQ++ students. This chapter contains an in-depth discussion of the research findings, as well as implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

Participants described activism as working for what you believe in, speaking up and speaking out in order to make a positive change, educating others about LGBTQ++ issues and needs, advocating for social equality regardless of sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression, and purposeful action or involvement in activities that raise awareness and share information about controversial issues in order to bring about political or social change. The narratives they shared and the images they created during interview sessions expanded on these initial descriptions of what activism means to them in the context of LGBTQ++ issues. Each participant articulated their belief that advocacy for and with all students, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, is an obligation for any mental health professional who works in a school. This study was guided by critical social theory, previous literature and three research questions:

1. What is salient in shaping the participants’ activist identities with regard to the LGBTQ++ community?
2. In what ways are school counselors activists for and with LGBTQ++ students?
3. What motivates and sustains school counselors’ social justice efforts?

Data analysis was informed by the conceptual framework, empirical-phenomenology, arts-based narrative inquiry, and the research questions. Case synopses were crafted from the interviews and artifacts while the illustrated narrative revealed three commonalities that provided insight into the activist trajectory of school counselors and the ways in which they engage in activism for LGBTQ++ students. The first finding, identifying with the LGBTQ++ community, includes the participant’s personal connection to the LGBTQ++ community, either as a member of the community themselves or having close friends who are. Secondly, pattern of recognizing oppression and working towards change, involves each participant’s ability and history of recognizing oppression when they encounter it and feeling compelled to help change the situation so that will be made more fair and just. The third commonality, education as a form of activism, includes education for students, others, and self. A visual collage was built upon the case synopses and common findings from the illustrated narratives. I sought to give form to the participants’ experiences that would communicate gained insight from this study in a tacit, allegorical way. The collage helped to express the feeling and emotion behind the data, in a way that written text cannot.

Participants’ activist efforts were both reactive and proactive, as well as solo and collaborative. They shared stories of leading and facilitating programs aimed at creating more inclusive and affirmative school climates, and also collaborating with teachers, administrators, community members, and students. Regarding the latter, they expressed the importance of being a role model and a leader to LGBTQ++ students.
Teaching marginalized students how to advocate for themselves and navigate barriers to personal, academic, and social success was a goal for each participant.

**Activist Identity Development, Sustainment, Motivation**

The activist identity of participants was shaped by both internal and external influences. External events within the larger political and societal climate triggered feelings and emotions that served as motivators for their activism. Life circumstances such as growing up in an abusive home, experiencing discrimination firsthand, or being raised by a strong role model also contributed.

Each participant discussed past experiences that contributed to their current activist identity. Tori and Marta were both influenced by their families, albeit in different ways. Tori was inspired to pursue a mental health degree that would help her better understand her abusive step-father and her mother’s decisions to remain with him while Marta was influenced by her Mother and is sustained by her spirituality as a Quaker. Helen discussed a lifetime of commitment to women's rights, animal rights, and environmental issues. Her passion for LGBTQ++ issues is a consequence of coming to terms with her own lesbian identity. Gillian conveyed her belief that advocacy is an innate part of her; she conjectures that it is something she was born with. This finding is similar to that of McMahon et al. (2010). Participants in McMahon’s exploration of personhood in relation to advocacy development revealed that they were emotionally connected to their role as advocates and discussed being influenced by experiences with others who engaged in social justice.

Each participant in this study has an individual history, complete with experiences, beliefs, emotions, and feelings, that make up the foundation for advocating
work around LGBTQ++ issues. Before they were school counselors advocating for LGBTQ++ students, they were already recognizing oppressive situations and taking actions to create alternatives. Critical social theory is concerned with addressing human desires, emancipating individuals, finding alternatives to oppressive social conditions, and challenging the status quo (Ngwenyama, 2002). The notion of power also runs strong throughout critical social theory as power is viewed as being present in every person and every facet of life (Foucault, 1980). Each participant described instances of observing those with power oppress those who are powerless, and expressed their desire to enact positive change in response. Critical social theory builds on the emancipatory function of knowledge by promoting one’s ability to critique conceptual and institutional dilemmas, particularly those that oppress (Leonardo, 2004).

Dilemmas were identified in each of their roles within the school system. Helen saw and heard her co-workers lack of awareness around LGBTQ++ issues. She also worked with LGBTQ++ students who experienced difficulties due to their real or perceived sexual orientation/gender identity. Before school policies were changed to be made more inclusive, these students were not protected from discrimination.

Marta felt disempowered when she and her partner did not receive the same benefits as married, heterosexual co-workers. She also saw a lack of LGBTQ++ resources and supports with the larger community in which she lived. In Gillian’s teaching of sex education, she advocated for a curriculum acknowledging that sex and gender exist along a continuum and are not restricted to a binary system. She was also emotionally moved by seeing students who felt unaccepted by their parents because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.
Tori felt compelled to help students who were not accepted by their families. She and Helen both spoke of feeling saddened by a rash of LBGTQ student suicides that made national news. Gillian also spoke of LBGTQ++ students who did not feel safe coming out to their families and the notion that she is the only person they have to talk to motivates and sustains her advocacy. She discussed the anger she felt when her gay friends were not afforded the right to marry like heterosexual couples were. These emotions felt among the participants motivated their activism and also helped to sustain their efforts. This is consistent with previous literature regarding the role of emotions in motivating individuals to join social movements and sustain their involvement (Bosco, 2007; Ruiz-Junco, 2013).

The process of each participant reflecting on social forces that perpetuate inequality and consider what actions it will take to change them can be understood as critical consciousness. Paulo Freire described critical consciousness as an awareness of cultural, psychological, economic, and social factors that determine the lives of individuals and groups (1970; 1973). This process has been recognized as the foundation for liberation, as critical reflection occurs before critical action.

A key element in participant’s activist trajectories was critical consciousness, as their lifetime pathways consisted of critical reflection, gaining new knowledge, and engaging in social action. The development of such critical consciousness is recognized as an iterative and continuous process (Mustakova-Possardt, 2004). Data from this study suggest that the participants’ activism is something that is built upon diverse circumstances and relationships and it evolves over time as one becomes aware of systems of privilege and oppression. Watts et al. (1999) speculate that critical
consciousness may serve as a resource for individuals to refer to in order to resist oppression and overcome barriers. Findings indicate that participants’ histories of critical consciousness paired with their connection to the LGBTQ++ community and personal experiences fueled their activism for LGBTQ++ students.

**Activism for and with LGBTQ++ Students**

Participants shared examples of the ways in which they have been activists for and with LGBTQ++ students. Collectively, their narratives highlighted instances of providing individual support to students and collaborating with students to bring about change, challenging systems of power and privilege, and educating students, self, and others. Each participant described their activism as being student-centered and their belief that it is an ethical responsibility of school counselors to advocate for all students. They perceive themselves as change agents who have access to various levels at which they may put forth interventions that help LGBTQ++ students, when necessary. This mentality among the participants aligns with the advancement of the counseling profession where counselors are called to act as advocates for and on behalf of all students (ACA, 2014; Bidell, 2011; Bemak & Chung, 2008; Bemak & Chung, 2005; Dixon, Tucker, & Clark, 2010; Erhard & Sinai, 2012; Ratts, DeKruyf, Chen-Hayes, 2007). Previous literature supports counselors’ responsibility to help foster an environment that encourages human development (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009).

**Supporting and Collaborating with LGBTQ++ Students.** Helen and Tori spoke of collaborating with students, as opposed to acting on behalf of students, to implement change. A specific strategy that Helen and Tori used to advocate for LGBTQ++ students was advising a GSA. Helen helped GSA students establish an anti-bullying program in
response to LGBTQ related suicides while Tori helped transgender students in GSA reach out to local medical professionals in the community to encourage them to implement a clinic devoted exclusively to the transgender community. Helen and Tori both reported that their GSA and similar school clubs were largely student-led. Their role as GSA adviser was one of support, guidance, and advocacy with the students. This finding is consistent with previous scholarship on LGBTQ youth-driven groups (Poteat et al., 2015; Kosciw, 2014; GLSEN, 2013; Mayberry, 2013; Griffin et al. 2004). Helen and Tori empowered students by allowing them to foster leadership skills. They encouraged students to engage in self-advocacy by serving as role models and teaching them to navigate barriers that hindered their social and emotional well-being.

**Challenging systemic barriers.** Each participant challenged systemic barriers and engaged in activism with the intention to modify existing school policies in order to create a more affirming environment. This type of activism is a focus in conceptual literature encouraging counselors to promote equality within a larger arena such as school, community, or society (Toporek, Lewis, and Crethar, 2009). When Marta sued the school district, her actions had far-reaching impacts. The positive change that resulted from this decision included benefits for other same-sex partners who worked in the district and a revamping of school policies that did not include protection for LGBTQ++ staff and students. Marta also initiated multiple LGBTQ groups within her larger community; these groups are a resource for LGBTQ++ individuals, including students at her district’s high school. Gillian and Helen brought up issues on behalf of transgender students to administration by advocating for gender neutral bathrooms. Gillian also brought up the importance of gender neutral costumes for a school play.
Education as Activism. Participants were similar in their efforts to increase their competence for educating students, school personnel, and themselves so that they could raise awareness and competence related to working with LGBTQ++ youth. This is consistent with critical social theory’s implicit goal of the emancipatory function of knowledge to transform (Leonardo, 2004).

Gillian’s efforts to create a more inclusive sex education curriculum were driven by her perceived responsibility as a school counselor to create an inclusive school environment. She sought to educate students about the spectrum of gender identity and sexual orientation, and in doing so, hoped to eradicate the heteronormative environment. Gillian was not the only participant to use education as a tool to raise awareness about LGBTQ++ issues. Marta incorporated diversity topics into her guidance lessons and taught students about different family constellations. Although, Marta was careful not to bring up LGBTQ++ language specifically because she did not feel it was appropriate at the elementary level and feared negative reactions from parents. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2014) encourages school counselors to support an inclusive curriculum at all grade levels and research has suggested that an LGBT-inclusive curriculum in middle and high school positively impacts the school climate (GLSEN, 2013). However, there is little research available on elementary school curriculum that includes a discussion of gender-nonconforming individuals and what such teaching would look like (Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013)

Other elementary school personnel, such as teachers, have noted that discussing non-normative gender in the classroom is unnecessary, difficult, and somewhat impossible (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Rands, 2009; Williams, 2002). Nevertheless, Marta did
incorporate topics related to family dynamics such as having two same-sex parents or guardians. She mentioned that even if she did want to address LGBTQ topics in her lessons, she wouldn’t know how to do so.

Tori and Helen disseminated resources and provided LGBTQ++ training and workshops to school personnel within their districts. Similar to Marta’s activism that extends into the community, Tori and Helen are often asked to provide trainings outside of their school districts. Each participant is viewed as an expert and a leader when it comes to knowledge of LGBTQ++ youth. This knowledge is something that has deepened over time and participants admitted feeling unsure at times due to lack of training and education.

All participants noted that additional training and education was self-initiated and most of their LGBTQ++ related knowledge is gleaned from personal experiences, reading articles online, and voluntarily attending conferences covering LGBTQ++ topics. With the exception of Gillian’s general advocacy course in graduate school, no other participants received LGBTQ-specific training or education in graduate school. Although, instructors did discuss LGBTQ topics in the context of diversity or multiculturalism. Literature related to the competence and skills of school counselors notes that many school counselors do not have adequate education when it comes to effectively advocating for LGBT students (Goodrich & Luke, 2010; Frank & Cannon, 2009).
Implications

Findings in this study about the role of school counselors in advocating for LGBTQ++ students contribute to the school counseling literature. The results of this study have implications for counselor education programs, K-12 students, and school systems.

Counselor Education Programs

Results suggest a need for more thorough education in regard to activism in counselor education programs. Education in this context can be understood as graduate school education that includes teaching skills as well as imparting knowledge that prepares students to act from a creative and innovative space in situations that warrant activism. This may help foster necessary critical consciousness among school counselors. Participants noted their lack of education regarding their activist efforts and any training or education gained post graduate school was entirely self-initiated. Gillian’s mention of being inspired by the one advocacy course she had in graduate school suggests that other counselor students may also be inspired to become activists within the schools they work in. Similar to McMahon’s (2010) study of personhood among counselors, participants discussed their capacity for risk taking and their emotional connection to advocating for others. Tori remarked on her efforts to combat burnout with self-care and Gillian shared how emotionally draining being an activist school counselor can be. Counselor education programs should include coursework that informs students on how to confront oppression, challenge inequalities, and learn how to prevent burnout.
Counselor education courses should explicitly address what activism would look like with specific marginalized populations in schools. Singh et al.’s (2010) study of school counselors’ experiences in initiating change highlighted several strategies employed by school counselors that are also observed in this study. Participants discussed initiating difficult conversations, consciousness raising, knowing how and when to intervene, and teaching students how to advocate for themselves. Perhaps an experiential component to counselor education courses would help to facilitate the development of critical consciousness among school counselors, with attention to teaching school counselors how to recognize systems of power and privilege and giving them the tools to challenge inequalities. Students who are well-equipped with the knowledge and resources to advocate may be more likely to do so, as participants in this study were more involved in activism as they gained competence and confident in how to competently proceed in a situation. As mentioned previously, Kieffer (1984) notes that if an individual believes they have the capacity to affect change, they are more likely to engage in activism. Participants also noted that engaging in difficult conversations does not have to be aggressive or tense. It is possible to enact change through sharing different perspectives in a calm and comfortable space.

Marta was the only elementary school counselor in this study and she shared that she did not know how to address sexual orientation and gender identity/expression at the elementary level. This, paired with the lack of empirical data on activism among elementary school counselors, suggests a need for more research of elementary school counselor activism to be conducted.
Students and Schools

There are also direct implications for students and school systems. Participants discussed advocating for policy change at the institutional level and working to create more inclusive environments. In 2016, LGBTQ++ students are attending schools that do not have policies that protect them from discrimination. This further supports the call for school counselors to advocate for change that impacts the entire school district – change that will have far-reaching and resounding positive consequences for marginalized students (ASCA, 2014). Similar to Grimes, Haskins, and Paisley’s (2013) study of rural school counselors who identify as social justice advocates, the findings from this study also highlight the importance of advocating within the sociopolitical domain. This type of activism warrants an integration of personal and professional selves, as school counselors consider their reputations when activism extends to this domain. Building relationships with other school personnel and members of the community can help meet the needs of students in innovative ways.

Participants also shared recent experiences of students feeling suicidal and/or unaccepted at home or school due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. In line with research on violence against LGBT youth (Kosciw et al., 2012; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; D’Augelli et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2005; Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002), it is imperative that schools implement policies that prevent harassment and violence due to sexual orientation and gender identity. Family acceptance of LGBTQ++ youth is also critical to their well-being and mental health. Graduate school programs in counselor education and professional development opportunities that provide school counselors with the skills and resources for working with parents who do not accept their
LGBTQ++ child may help to prevent negative health outcomes and/or suicide among students.

**Limitations**

While this study aims to have multiple and far-reaching positive impacts, it is not without limitations. Due to the nature of data collection, participants are self-reporting and this poses several issues. Participants are recalling their experiences and may only remember certain experiences or may remember them incorrectly. They may have also embellished or provided responses in a way that aligned with what they thought I wanted to hear, as opposed to what actually occurred (Creswell, 2014).

A second limitation is the limited the context of the study (Creswell, 2014). The geographic regions represented in this study were not incredibly diverse. Two participants were from Pennsylvania, one participant was from Nevada, and one from Kentucky. The goal of this study is transferability, as opposed to generalizability. Transferability allows findings to be transferred to similar settings but the experiences of the school counselors are not meant to be representative of every school counselor in the United States.

A third limitation is that participants are underrepresented in regard to sexual orientation, gender identity, and race. All participants were White, cisgender, female individuals and the majority of participants identified as a sexual minority. A 2011 survey showed that women do outnumber men in the school counseling profession by a considerable margin and three out of four counselors identify as White (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011). More research examining LGBTQ++ activism among school counselors of varying identities is needed.
Suggestions for Future Research

This exploratory study yielded insight into what shapes an activist identity among school counselors and what their activism for LGBTQ++ students involves. More research devoted to general activism among school counselors is warranted so that we may better understand the process of becoming an activist as well as the ways in which school counselors integrate their activist identity into their professional school counseling identity. This type of scholarship could serve as a foundation for further studies on activism with specific populations. Questions about motivations, experiences, and intersecting identities of school counselors/activists remain. For example, researchers may consider studying why some school counselors answer the call to engage in activism and others do not. An exploratory, qualitative methodology would be appropriate here as it would allow for an in-depth look at what contributes to developing an activist identity. A more diverse sample in regard to gender identity, sexual orientation, race, and age would provide insight into the ways in which demographic characteristics may influence one's activism. For example, it would be beneficial to study the role of age in activism; the sample represented in this study ranged in age from 44-61, which may be indicative that it takes time to build a sense of competency around activism.

Another area that deserves more attention is the ways in which school counselors balance their professional school counselor identity with an activist identity. Perhaps further studies may examine workplace identity development as it pertains to the relationship between activism and one's professional school counselor identity.
Gaining this knowledge could add to the dialogue around how to integrate these two, often separate, identities.

Research could also be expanded to include school counselors who are representative of different geographic regions. This would further our understanding of how different geographical locations influence the school context for LGBTQ++ students and impact activism efforts. Further, because the majority of research related to LGBTQ++ students and school counselor advocacy is conducted at the middle and high school level, more research regarding school counselors’ activism for LGBTQ++ elementary students is warranted. This would help counselors and counselor educators identify effective and appropriate advocacy efforts to be employed with this younger age group.

The collage created in this study may be used as a pedagogical tool to teach students about activism, extending beyond traditional teaching methods. Students may be asked to create their own art in response to classroom discussions about activism. This would add a powerful and tangible component to the coursework. Artwork could then be shared within a large group discussion and students would be given the opportunity to look for similarities and differences among each other’s art; this type of analysis could then help to build research skills. The addition of art in the classroom would hopefully foster student engagement and empowerment.
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Dear __________________,

My name is Carly Scarton and I am a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at Penn State University. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study concerning the identities and experiences of school counselors who are activists for and with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other gender expansive and/or sexual minority (LGBTQ++) students.

This email was forwarded to you because you have been identified as someone who may meet the selection criteria for this study. You are eligible to participate if you are a K-12 school counselor over the age of 18 who is currently practicing in the United States and who has demonstrated marked involvement and efforts to improve the school climate for LGBTQ++ students.

Participants will be asked to partake in two in-person interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes. Interviews will include questions as well as arts-based methods such as drawing. Participants will also be asked to submit artifacts relevant to their activism for and with LGBTQ++ students. Interviews will be audio recorded and steps will be taken to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Information and materials collected during the interviews will be destroyed upon the study's completion.

If you are interested in participating, I would greatly appreciate if you would email me at cas577@psu.edu with permission to contact you by phone or email to explain the purpose and process of this study. Please provide your phone number and a few days/times that would be convenient for me to contact you. If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me or my dissertation chair, Dr. JoLynn Carney, at jcarney@psu.edu or by phone at 814.863.2404. Additionally, if you know someone who meets the criteria for this study and who may be interested in participating, you may ask that individual to email me as well.

Thank you for your consideration in contributing to this important study.

Warm regards,

Carly Scarton, M.Ed., NCC
Ph.D. Candidate, Counselor Education & Supervision
The Pennsylvania State University
APPENDIX B

CONSENT FOR RESEARCH

The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Activist Identity Development and Experiences Among School Counselors who Advocate for and with LGBTQ++ Students

Principal Investigator: Carly Scarton, M.Ed., NCC
Department of Educational Psychology, Counseling & Special Education
125 CEDAR Building
University Park, PA 16802
Telephone Number: 814.341.1875

Advisor: Dr. JoLynn Carney
Telephone Number: 814.863.2404

Participant’s Printed Name ____________________________

We are asking you to be in a research study. This form gives you information about the research.

Whether or not you take part is up to you. You can choose not to take part. You can agree to take part and later change your mind. Your decision will not be held against you.

Please ask questions about anything that is unclear to you and take your time to make your choice.

1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to better understand the activist identity development of K-12 school counselors and their experiences in advocating for LGBTQ+ students. I am specifically interested in what motivates and sustains school counselors’ activism efforts for this population and what experiences shape their activist identity.

2. Procedures to be followed: If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, participate in two interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes each, and complete an activity prior to the first interview. The demographic questionnaire is expected to take 5-10 minutes to complete. After
completion of the packet, in-person interviews will be arranged and the supplemental activity will be distributed via email. This activity is not expected to exceed 30 minutes. In the event that meeting in person is not feasible, digital video conferences will be arranged. Interviews will be audio-recorded. Participants will be contacted one time following completion of interviews to check for accuracy of data. You are free to skip any questions that you are uncomfortable answering on the demographic questionnaire and during interviews.

3. **Discomforts and Risks:** There is minimal to no risk for psychological discomfort beyond that experienced in daily life. Participants will be given the option not to answer if they are uncomfortable doing so. There is a risk for loss of privacy and confidentiality; however, these risks will be minimized through strict confidentiality procedures, careful handling of data, the use of pseudonyms, and non-disclosure of working environments. Referral information will be provided if needed.

4. **Benefits:** A benefit to you is that you may gain insight into your own activist identity and experiences. Other benefits of participating in this study include helping to add to literature about activism among K-12 school counselors, particularly for LGBTQ++ students. Your participation may help inform counselor training programs about effective practices for educating future school counselors.

5. **Other options that are available instead of participating in this research study:**
   You may decide not to participate in this research.

6. **Duration/Time:** The demographic questionnaire is expected to take 5-10 minutes to complete. The two interviews will each last 60 minutes. The supplemental activity is not expected to exceed 30 minutes. You will be contacted once more after interviews to review data for accuracy.
7. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential.

Your research records will be labeled using initials and hardcopy files will be stored and secured in a locked filing cabinet in State College, PA. Electronic files will be password protected and only the primary investigator will have access to the files.

In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared. Pseudonyms will be used upon presentation of the research. Only the primary investigator will have access to the audio recordings. We will do our best to keep your participation in this research study confidential to the extent permitted by law. However, it is possible that other people may find out about your participation in this research study. For example, the following people/groups may check and copy records about this research.

- The Office for Human Research Protections in the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services
- The Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies) and
- The Office for Research Protections.

8. **Right to Ask Questions:**

Please call the head of the research study (principal investigator), Carly Scarton, at 814.341.1875, if you:

- Have questions, complaints or concerns about the research.
- Believe you may have been harmed by being in the research study.

You may also contact the Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775, ORProtections@psu.edu, if you:

- Have questions regarding your rights as a person in a research study.
- Have concerns or general questions about the research.
- You may also call this number if you cannot reach the research team or wish to offer input or to talk to someone else about any concerns related to the research.

The ORP cannot answer questions about research procedures. Questions about
research procedures can only be answered by the research team.

9. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You may choose not to answer certain questions. Your permission to use your data is voluntary and you make revoke your permission at any time. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. You must also hold at least a Master’s degree and be a currently practicing school counselor in the United States who is working with LGBTQ++ students. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Participant Signature: ________________ Date ________________

Principal Investigator: ________________ Date ________________
APPENDIX C

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: INTERVIEW ONE

Directions: Please answer the following prompts in the context of your LGBTQ++ activism as a school counselor. Do not provide identifying information about any student.

1. Discuss a time when you were an activist for LGBTQ++ students.

2. Discuss a time when you took a risk.

3. Discuss a time when you failed.

4. Discuss a time when change/transformation occurred because of an action you took.

5. Discuss a time that you consider a turning point within your activism for LGBTQ++ students.

Additional Questions:

1) What experiences have shaped your activist identity?

2) How would you describe the climate of your school?
   a. What is the environment like for LGBTQ++ students?

3) Tell me about when you first recognized activism as part of your professional counseling identity.
   a. What significant events and experiences helped to form this activist identity?
   b. What motivates and sustains this activism?

4) In what ways are you an activist for your LGBTQ++ students? Can you provide examples?
   a. Can you tell me about a positive experience?
   b. Can you tell me about a not-so-positive experience?

5) How would you describe your competence level in working with LGBTQ++ students?
   a. What factors have led to this level of competence?
   b. What was your graduate school training like in regard to working with this population? What other training have you had? Were these self-initiated or required in some way?

6) What else would you like to share?
APPENDIX D

VISUALIZATION SCRIPT: INTERVIEW TWO

Disclaimer: Do not provide any identifying information about any student.

1. **Relax:** Position yourself comfortably and when you’re ready, close your eyes. Take a deep breath in, and out. I invite you to focus on your breath... and as you continue with this deep breathing, release any tension you may hold in your body. Now, shift your attention to your mind and release any distractions that you don’t need during our time together.

2. **Focus:** I’d like for you to think about a specific time as a school counselor when you advocated for or with LGBTQ++ students. Maybe it was just one student, maybe it was more. Allow yourself to revisit this space and memory. Let me know when you have that memory ready.

3. **Recall:** Where are you? What do you see around you? Who is there with you? What are you doing? What are others doing? What is the energy of the environment like? How is the situation making you feel? What else is coming up for you?

4. **Art-Making Exercise:** When you’re ready, gently shift your attention back to the present. Using the materials in front of you, create an image that represents the event and associated thoughts and feelings surrounding the event.

**Follow-up Questions:**

Tell me about this image/event.

a. Where are you?
b. Who is with you?
c. How do you feel?
d. What was significant about this event?
e. In what ways do you feel supported/not supported?
f. How would you situate this event within your identity?
g. Where would this event fall on your timeline of activism?

3. What did this exercise reveal to you about yourself/your work/your identities?
APPENDIX E

IRB Approval

Vice President for Research
Office for Research Protections
The Pennsylvania State University
330 Building, Suite 205
University Park, PA 16802
Phone: (814) 865-1775
Fax: (814) 863-8699
Email: orprotections@psu.edu
Web: www.research.psu.edu/orp

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

Date: April 8, 2016
From: Julie James, IRB Analyst
To: Carly Scarton

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Submission:</th>
<th>Initial Study</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title of Study:</td>
<td>Activist Identity Development and Experiences Among School Counselors who Advocate for and with LGBTQ++ Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Investigator:</td>
<td>Carly Scarton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study ID:</td>
<td>STUDY00004680</td>
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<tr>
<td>Submission ID:</td>
<td>STUDY00004680</td>
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<tr>
<td>Funding:</td>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Documents Approved: | • Demographic Questionnaire (4-7-16), Category: Data Collection Instrument  
• HRP 591 Protocol for Human Subject Research (4-7-16), Category: IRB Protocol  
• Interview 1 Prompts (3-30-16), Category: Data Collection Instrument  
• Interview 2: Visualization Script (3-30-16), Category: Data Collection Instrument |

The Office for Research Protections determined that the proposed activity, as described in the above-referenced submission, does not require formal IRB review because the research met the criteria for exempt research according to the policies of this institution and the provisions of applicable federal regulations.
Continuing Progress Reports are **not** required for exempt research. Record of this research determined to be exempt will be maintained for five years from the date of this notification. If your research will continue beyond five years, please contact the Office for Research Protections closer to the determination end date.

Changes to exempt research only need to be submitted to the Office for Research Protections in limited circumstances described in the below-referenced Investigator Manual. If changes are being considered and there are questions about whether IRB review is needed, please contact the Office for Research Protections.

Penn State researchers are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (**HRP-103**), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within CATS IRB (**http://irb.psu.edu**).
V I T A

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EDUCATION:

Ph.D., 2016 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
CACREP Accredited Program
Counselor Education & Supervision

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LGBT Health Policy and Practice

M.Ed., 2010 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
CACREP Accredited Program
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B.S., 2008 Saint Francis University, Loretto, PA
Sociology and Criminal Justice

LICENSURE AND CERTIFICATION:

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School Counselor Certification (PA)
North Carolina Professional Educator’s License – School Counselor (Grades K-12)

PUBLICATIONS:

Scarton, C., & Mellin, E.A. (2016). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender students and
school climate: School mental health promotion strategies. In R.J. Waller (Ed.),
Mental health promotion in schools: Special topics, special challenges. Volume II.
Oak Park, IL: Bentham Science eBooks.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

2014 Co-instructor for CN ED 589: Elementary School Counseling
Internship Seminar, College of Education, Pennsylvania State
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2013 Co-instructor for CN ED 506: Individual Counseling Procedures,
College of Education, Pennsylvania State University

2013 Co-instructor for CN ED 595E: Child Counseling, College of
Education, Pennsylvania State University