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**QUEERING SEX EDUCATION:  
RURAL SEX EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF QUEER ISSUES**

A Dissertation in

Curriculum and Instruction and Women's Studies

by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore how rural sex educators create environments that are inclusive to queer students. The normative experiences of sex education in the United States guided this qualitative study that was informed by queer theory and performance ethnography. Examined within these normative experiences are the implications of policy and curricula, the impact this has on queer students, teacher responses to the injustice of normalizing practices, an analysis of queer students and teachers in rural environments specifically, and an evaluation of the silence of rural queerness. This provided the lens through which the practices of rural sex educators who worked to create inclusive environments for queer students were viewed. Challenging definitions, such as sex education, rural, and queer, - along with the tension of using the word queer in non-academic settings - are also addressed. The primary means of data collection in this study was an online focus group with nine rural sex educators who actively work to create inclusive environments for queer students. In addition, I engaged in an active journaling process that included both an audit trail of events as well as personal creative writings that served as ancillary data.

As a qualitative study informed by queer theory and ethnography, findings of the study are first presented in the form of guided narratives followed by an analysis of common themes in the narratives. Themes within the sex educators' narratives indicate that they navigate their rural environments to be inclusive to queer students in four key ways: (a) engaging with various levels of community; (b) shaping their own classrooms to reflect their values; (c) connecting with students by creating an environment where all questions are answered; and, (d) teaching students to think critically about sexuality and the impact it has on their lives.

Implied throughout this study is that what is taught in a sex education classroom is that which the community finds to be philosophically within the constraints of "normalcy"

(Rasmussen, Rofes, & Talburt, 2004; Campos, 2002; Irvine, 2002; Moran, 2000; Warner, 1999; Wolfensberger, 1972). Quite a few rural districts in the study were open to queering sex education, and therefore the educators often did not have to be as subversive as one may assume. All educators found it critical to either have an explicit set of classroom rules, or to be part of a school district that had these and truly enforced them - not only with students but also administrators and parents. Educators sometimes found it necessary to create sanctuaries in their classrooms due to the external community pressures that students engaged beyond the boundaries of the classroom. The data indicate that teachers will be challenged by community activists, religious leaders, parents, administrators, students, or other community constituents, reinforcing Dejean's (2001) idea that many educators are discontent with the status quo and actively working to overcome normalizing practices. A lack of consistent training for teachers makes it challenging to define what educators consider to be a "queer-inclusive" environment, since no standards exist. Educators felt that in order to teach critical thinking, which fits in with the federal definition of abstinence-only education, they were obligated to provide accurate information to students, including answers to questions as broad as "What is sex?"

This study contributes to the fields of education and women's studies in multiple ways. First, it identifies the importance of critical thinking about queerness in sex education. Queer students need to perceive that classroom activities affirm their experiences. Second, it highlights the importance of educating communities and teachers on queer ways of knowing, which increases the possibility of engaging learners in ways that are seen as relevant to their lives. Third, it underscores the need for consistency and measurement of sex education efforts in the classroom. Fourth, it highlights the unique rural voice within queer-inclusive sex education, a voice that has often been ignored or dismissed. Suggestions for further research and implications for education theory and practice are discussed.

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## Chapter 1

# INTRODUCTION, KEY TERMS, AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine sex educators working in rural public school environments who are successfully queering sex education. This queering may not be labeled as such by the educators, but is an academic term utilized throughout this work very specifically, as queer is often a term not commonly utilized in public school environments due to its historic negative perception. This is an investigation into how educators, who often face legal ramifications for teaching inclusively in rural schools and communities, find ways to do so. I ask “How do rural sex educators create environments which are inclusive to queer students?”

In this study, I utilize queer theory in combination with ethnodrama to help articulate alternate notions of sex education while simultaneously articulating new methods of creating knowledge. The combination of ethnodrama with queer theory, and the resulting performance piece which will later emerge, forces us to revisit knowledge as active (versus passive). In the space of performing research, new meanings can emerge to illuminate ideas. The purpose of using this approach is to help us find the moments of queer destabilization which emerge between teachers, students, curriculum, and community within sex education. Alongside the traditional formal, scholarly textual aspect to my dissertation, I include my own personal writings. The culmination of my research, however, will later include a performance piece which represents the voices of the educators with whom I worked. Using ethnodrama as a means to present research invites those involved to truly be *present* in a way that reading a document does not. The nature of a performance encourages those who are present to participate in their own knowledge

creation, thus changing (or queering) the entire concept of knowledge in relation to research. In addition, performance makes research more accessible to those who may be outside academe, and accessibility in research is critical to me as a feminist researcher

By examining sex educators who are themselves engaged in queering sex education, in ways both overt and covert, and then developing their words into a performance piece, the entire project of conceptualizing curriculum is also be queered. The mix of queer theory, feminist pedagogy, and ethnodrama pushes us away from the simple questions of who is teaching and what is taught toward instead an understanding of the forces and processes which shape the teachers who are queering curriculum. This study demonstrates that curriculum itself is a performance, and the teachers involved in queering sex education are themselves players in this performance.

### **Key Terms**

There are multiple terms used throughout this study that must be understood in order to comprehend the study itself. In all cases, there are multiple definitions for each of the terms below, and therefore I have defined below the ways in which I will be utilizing the terms. The terms defined below include rural, sex education, queer, and ethnodrama.

#### **Rural**

The definition of rurality remains elusive. The Census Bureau has consistently defined rurality since 1880 as a population of less than 2,500 located outside an urban area, and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) utilizes the Census definition of rural for its data

(although it does not for other terms, such as ‘city’). The use of the term rural across research is not standardized, causing great confusion.

When it comes to distinguishing rural from urban places, researchers and policymakers employ a dizzying array of definitions....Because the U.S. is a nation in which so many people live in areas that are not clearly rural or urban, seemingly small changes in the way rural areas are defined can have large impacts on who and what are considered rural. Researchers and policymakers share the task of choosing appropriately from among the more than two dozen rural definitions currently used by Federal agencies. For example, research on suburban development and its effect on rural real estate prices would probably define rural differently than a study designed to track and explain economic and social changes affecting rural people and places. Programs developed to address the unique problems that small rural governments face will not necessarily target the same rural areas as will programs that are developed to help rural businesses operating in credit-constrained markets. The key is to use a rural-urban definition that best fits the needs of a specific activity, recognizing that any simple dichotomy hides a complex rural-urban continuum, with very gentle gradations from one level to the next (Cromartie and Bucholz, 2008, p. 29).

Since my research is focused within the field of education, I utilize the Census Bureau / NCES definition of rural. NCES utilizes an urban-centric classification system developed by the Office of Management and Budget (2000). Rural schools are defined as such based on their proximity to an urban area. There are four categories in NCES’ classification system: city or suburban schools, which are further broken into large, midsize, and small; and town or rural schools, broken into fringe, distant, or remote (Provasnik et al, 2007). A rural fringe area is that which is “less than or equal to five miles from an urbanized area [population of greater than 50,000] as well as less than 2.5 miles from an urban cluster [populations between 25,000 and 50,000]” (Provasnik et al, 2007, p. 2). A rural distant area is five to 25 miles from an urbanized area and 2.5 to ten miles from an urban cluster (Provasnik et al, 2007). A rural remote area is “more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than ten miles from an urban cluster” (Provasnik et al, 2007, p. 2). The NCES then took the actual address of the school and mapped it accordingly within the categories of city, suburban, town, or rural.

## **Sex Education**

In relation to sex education curriculum, there is no standard definition. In the broadest sense sex education can be defined as “finding out about sex from parents, family, friends, teachers, adults, and mass media” (Campos, 2002, p. 4). This may include learning information about sex (correct or incorrect), learning about yourself, learning about others, learning about sexual behavior, and learning how sex integrates into life. For the purpose of this work, sex education incorporates all of these aspects; however, due to the nature of the study, the focus is on impressions of what teachers attempt to teach in the formal sex education environment.

## **Queer**

Throughout this work, queer is used in multiple contexts. It is utilized as an adjective (i.e. “Queer students attend school” or “Queer theory is different from gay and lesbian studies”) and also a verb (i.e. “To queer oneself is to be different” or “I queer the performance of gender”). Due to the critical nature of these terms, I offer examples of its many uses below.

It is important to note at this time, however, the challenge of this term during the study. Queer historically was a word utilized as a verbal slur against non-normative sexualities. Today, academics and activists have embraced the word queer as an opportunity to reclaim its power, but this reclamation has not transcended to the public school system. Throughout the actual study period, in interacting with the educators, I use the word infrequently, and instead substitute more accepted words, such as lesbian, gay, and bisexual; non-heterosexual; and sexual minorities. For the intent of this study, I use the word queer in numerous ways throughout this work, yet it is important to acknowledge the tension faced with this word in the non-academic community.

### *Queer and LGBT*

For many, the term queer is viewed as shorthand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT). However, this is not so for both queer theory generally and this piece specifically. I use the term queer as an adjective to “describe identities and practices that foreground the instability inherent in the supposedly stable relationship between anatomical sex, gender, and sexual desire” (Corber and Valocchi, 2003, p. 1). I believe that this definition, rooted in queer theory (see below), exposes “the widely held belief that sex, gender, and sexuality have a causal or necessary relationship to each other” as a fiction “that works to stabilize heterosexuality” (Corber and Valocchi, 2003, p. 1).

### *Queer Theory*

Queer theory is a body of work that is used to examine multiple, socially constructed identities and to question linguistic binaries such as homosexual/heterosexual, male/female, and Black/white (Adam, 2002). Queer theory’s work denaturalizes dominant constructions of sexual identity by emphasizing that sexuality is not a personal attribute but a cultural category. In other words, society creates classifications of people, including sexual classifications like heterosexual and homosexual. Therefore, sexuality, both linguistically and performatively, is a “discursive production rather than a natural condition [which] is part of [the] larger contention that modern subjectivity is an effect of networks of power” (Jagose, 1996, p. 80). Rather than viewing gender and sexuality as binaries, with male/female and straight/gay as the only choices, queer theory complicates gender and sexual identity by integrating multiple continuums with multiple and ever-changing definitions (Howard, 1999, xviii). In addition, it relies on the concept of performativity, which “cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and

constrained repetition of norms” (Butler, 1990, p. 95). Therefore, queer theory questions the stability of sexual and gender identities, both of which rely heavily on intertwined performances to be realized.

### ***Queer as a Verb***

Similar to queer as a noun, "to queer" in its verb format is to disrupt the dominant cultural understanding of the naturalness of heterosexuality and conventional gender relations. As an example, to say someone queered the concept of gender in biology class implies she took the concept of gender, which was presented as biological fact, and indicated it is a performance, not a “fact.” Another example is the field of queer studies itself, which queered the fields of women’s studies and LGBT studies, and developed a new way of looking at gender/sexuality. Finally, a person may queer gender through exaggerating a typical gendered way of dressing, by dressing in a way that is inconsistent with gender, or acting in a manner which is not gendered.

### ***Queer[ing] as a Performance***

The definition of queer as a performance is taken from Washington (2005):

Queering is a performative way of creating social critique that compels a viewer or audience member to psychologically see their selves within the issue being explored. Queering uses direct address to layer the viewer’s experience so that he or she feels that they are in a concrete, immediate, and personal relationship with the work in the indexical present – the conceptual space between the artist/artwork and the audience that is only recognizable within the immediate here and now (p. 18).

In this context, performance implies the roles people play in a structure and the effects of these interactions. To quote Goffman (1959): “A performance may be defined as all the activity



of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (p. 15).

## **Ethnodrama**

My primary artistic interest lies in ethnodrama, which stems from ethnotheatre. Ethnotheatre is applied theatre presentations powered by human stories. “An ethnodrama, the written script, consists of dramatized selections of narratives collected through interviewing” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. x). Unlike traditional conceptions of drama, which are often highly fictionalized, ethnodrama “maintain[s] close allegiance to the lived experiences of real people while presenting their stories through an artistic medium” (Saldana, 2005, p. 3). Some have labeled this field of inquiry as creative nonfiction.

## **Sex education regulations in the US**

### **Challenges of definition**

“Sex education” can range from an overview of HIV and sexually-transmitted infections, to sexual decision-making, abstinence, and abortion, to name just a few areas. In 1999, 57% of sexuality education teachers did not have prescribed curricula, therefore making it even harder to track *what* is being taught. In addition, approximately one-third of schools require parental permission for students to attend sex education classes, so not all students have equal access to information (Darroch, Landry, and Singh, 2000). With such a strong recent emphasis on

abstinence in the curriculum, it has been found that certain topics are being abandoned within the curriculum compared to ten years ago, including condoms as a barrier to sexually transmitted infection prevention, birth control, and LGBT identity (Wilson, 2000). It is important to remember, however, that while it is unclear *what* is being taught, it is clear that 48 states have taken funding from the federal government that is requires the state to have abstinence promotion outside of marriage as their “exclusive purpose” (Landry, Kaeser, & Richards, 1999, p. 280).

In addition to the confusion over *what* is in the formal curriculum, there is further confusion over *who* sex educators are. In many states, sex educators may or may not be certified. In Pennsylvania, for example, some knowledge of sexuality is required in the K-12 Health and Physical Education and the School Counselor certifications (*Pennsylvania*, n.d.). However, studies have found that “nonspecialist, or classroom, teachers are the largest category of sexuality education teachers” (Landry, Singh, and Darroch, 2000, p. 218).

Adding to this definitional confusion – over what sex education is and who exactly is teaching it – the issue of schools in rural environments makes this even more confusing. When the high poverty rates found in rural areas is matched with federally funded programs that set a “legislative and ideological precedent for federal funding of abstinence-only programs,” (Legal Momentum, 2007, p. 4), it should come as no surprise that many rural areas are grabbing at this low-hanging fruit and initiating abstinence-only sex education programs.

The federal government’s involvement and influence over sex education is not new. Taxpayer money has been used for sex education for over 25 years (SIECUS, 2005), although federal law does not require sex education in public schools (Collins, Alagiri, and Summers, 2002). What is relatively new – for approximately the last decade – is the federal government’s fiscal emphasis on abstinence-only education. Since 1996, the government has spent over a billion dollars on these programs, despite limited research proving effectiveness, and over \$204 million in 2007 alone (SIECUS, 2009). These government-funded abstinence-only education

programs have allocated funding via a variety of sources, with three main initiatives receiving the bulk of the funding: the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) of 1981, the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, and Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE) program of 2000.

### **Adolescent Family Life Act**

The Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) of 1981 was a reflection of the conservative shift during the Reagan era and passed without debate in Congress. It was posed as an alternative to previous programs supported by Congress (specifically Title X of the Public Health Act and Titles V, XIX, and XX of the Social Security Act) which funded public contraceptive programs (Irvine, 2002). AFLA shifted “the discourse on the prevention of teenage pregnancy away from contraception and instead to ‘chastity’ or ‘morality’” (Irvine, 2002, p. 90). AFLA required grant recipients in the program to involve religious organizations and prohibited funding to any group providing “abortion-related” services, including counseling, referral, or subcontracts, and therefore placed a barrier to federal funding for many hospitals and family planning clinics (Donovan, 1984).

During the initial phases of AFLA, programs used federal funding to develop religious-based sex education curricula, which then led to misrepresentation of medical and psychological opinion with little to no evaluative follow up. In 1983, the *Kendrick v. Heckler* case was brought forward to counter the entanglement of church and state. It was settled in 1993 (Irvine, 2005). The result, however, was that many of the sex education curricula prior to *Kendrick* simply removed the word “God” from materials but kept the spirit of Catholic or evangelic doctrine intact, along with positioning which contradicts medical findings. For example,

St. Margaret’s Hospital submitted a public school curriculum for approval to [Health and Human Services] in 1984 after *Kendrick* had been filed. The curriculum, which the [Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention] approved, continued to list death first

among possible medical complications [of premarital sex] and asserted that there are no medical or psychological conditions for which an abortion might be indicated [Irvine, 2005, p. 100].

AFLA allowed religious and conservative evangelical discourse into the sexual morality taught in schools, helping to shape “healthy” adolescent sexual behavior. It also created the commercially-driven abstinence-only sex education marketplace. By the end of 1990s, “there were over twenty major abstinence-only curricula commercially available for public schools” (Irvine, 2005, p. 102). In addition, many of the federally funded programs allocated less than three percent of funding to evaluation, thus creating a need for evaluation which the private sector, primarily the conservative religious market, gladly undertook. A review of evaluations in 2001 concluded that nearly all of the evaluations of abstinence-only programs were so flawed as to be meaningless (Kirby, 2001).

### **Title V: The Welfare Reform Act**

The Welfare Reform Act of 1996 “established a new funding stream to provide grants to states for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs” (SIECUS, 2008, para. 6). Part of the challenge of this Title V initiative was to define abstinence-only education, and any program that accepts funding must adhere to the following guidelines:

Abstinence education is defined in the law as an educational or motivational program which has as its exclusive purpose, teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity; teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school age children; teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems; teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity; teaches that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects; teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents, and society; teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to sexual advances; and teaches the

importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1998, Section 510.b.2).

The authors of this bill have ensured that programs which discuss contraception or place equal emphasis on healthy sexual decision-making and abstinence are not eligible. In addition, the authors of the legislation go to great lengths to define abstinence education, but the definition is dependent on an understanding of what constitutes sexual activity. While the authors go to great lengths to define what sexual activity is not, there is limited to no information on what sexual activity is.

### **Community-Based Abstinence Education**

In 2000, Congress increased abstinence education funding through the Community Based Abstinence Education (CBAE) program, which followed the 1998 definition of abstinence. These funds are even more restrictive than AFLA funds, in that those utilizing them must incorporate *all* eight key parts of the federal definition of abstinence, whereas previously if *one* aspect was incorporated, it counted as abstinence education. The main difference, however, is that rather than money flowing from the federal government to the states for distribution, the federal government now directly gives to community-based programs, including religious-based programs. By removing the states from the distribution process, the federal government has more direct control over the promotion of abstinence-only education. In 2001, funding for CBAE was \$20 million; by fiscal year 2007, this was increased 450 percent to \$113 million and increased to \$141 million for fiscal year 2009 (SIECUS, 2009). No federal funding was distributed for comprehensive sex education. Without any fiscal incentive for teaching comprehensive sex education, cash-strapped schools are often left without a viable option outside of abstinence-only.

## **Sex Education in Rural Environments**

### **Challenges of rural environments**

Rural school districts have a unique combination of issues that create challenges specific to them. When reading the challenges individually, it is correct to note that many of these issues may be shared with urban or suburban school districts. However, it is the combination of *all* of these elements – size, poverty, financial distress, distance from resources, traditions of local control, declining enrollments, and rapid ethnic diversification - that makes rural school districts unique.

As can be imagined, one of the first challenges facing rural school districts is their small size. Secondly, poverty in rural areas is higher than poverty in urban areas – the odds of being poor are 1.2 to 2.3 times higher for individuals in rural versus urban areas (Fisher, 2004; O'Hare, 1988). Poverty is an ongoing problem and, although this may also be a problem in urban areas, long-term poverty is more prevalent in rural areas (Simmons, Dolan, and Braun, 2007). Poverty rates in rural areas are approximately fourteen percent, while in urban areas poverty is approximately twelve percent (Economic Research Service, 2005). Rural incomes also remain below urban incomes, with the average earnings of rural workers lagging by as much as 21 percent (Economic Research Service, 2003). Third, in light of smaller populations and poverty, it should come as no surprise that rural districts are in financial distress (Jimerson, 2005). Numerous forces work to squeeze these districts fiscally – an inadequate tax base, resistance to new taxes, and state policies which favor wealthier areas and view rural schools as burdens (Rural School and Community Trust, 2008). A fourth (and somewhat obvious) consideration of school districts is distance from an urban core and the resources typically available in these core areas. A fifth area effecting rural schools is the tradition of local control, for many local governance

systems have allowed local communities to have some level of control over curriculum and instruction that reflects community values. Sixth, rural areas are experiencing declining enrollments. 33 percent of all public schools in rural areas report severe underenrollment, which is defined as schools that enroll less than 75 percent of the number of students the school was designed to accommodate in its permanent facilities (Provasnik, 2007). A final challenge of rural areas in recent years is rapid ethnic diversification (Jimerson, 2005). Currently, 22.9% of all rural school students are ethnic and racial minorities, which is a 54.9% increase over the past ten years (Johnson & Strange, 2007).

In addition to the challenges rural school districts face, rural communities are also faced with unique challenges. Moreover, many rural communities still suffer from “high unemployment and underemployment, poor quality of employment, outward migration of young people, and low quality services” (Pezzini, 2000, p. 50). This situation creates a particular problem in which those who are able to relocate do so, leaving behind a population of older and/or poorer people with less education (Jimerson, 2005).

Combining rurality and sex education serves as a prime opportunity to think differently about sexuality, or to queer these contexts. Sex education is a prime opportunity to apply queer theory to view the relationality of queerness to location. How does the uniqueness of rural environments call for a different way of looking at sex education? How does the rural environment inhibit or encourage queer voices in sex education? Queer theory offers assistance in finding direction to these questions.

### **Queering these contexts**

The fundamental problem in contemporary approaches to sex education is their refusal to accept secondary school students as capable of having any sexual agency, or choosing when,

where, and how to have sex. In particular, the problem for queer students is the inherent heteronormative metanarrative in the curriculum. To top off this essentialist heteronormative narrative, there is a deafening silence in the field of sex education related to rurality and queerness and thus an inherent metronormativity. Initiatives aimed at healthy queer development are routinely urban-based and typically emerge from some sort of resource center or university. There are some excellent queer-positive sexuality education resources in existence, but 100% have been developed in urban contexts (for examples, see Hubbard's *Choosing Health* (1997), developed by ETR out of Santa Cruz, CA; SIECUS' *Filling the Gaps* (1998), out of NYC; and Steve Brown's *Streetwise to Sex-wise* (1993) from Planned Parenthood of Northern New Jersey). In a recent review of key sex education resources available online, ranging from Department of Education resources to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), there was no mention of queer identity in a rural context with the exception of rural HIV/AIDS prevention.

I propose the following key road map for further exploration of queer-inclusive sex education in a rural environment (Pinar, 1998). Begin by acknowledging the need for understanding all forms of queerness, including those outside of metropolitan areas, and empirically acknowledge the lack of rural voices that have shaped so much of contemporary queer theory. From there, describe the ways in which not only queer but also non-queer lives are created and maintained in rural environments, always recognizing that sexuality is both imposed upon as well as shaped by rural environments. With this description, one can then begin to theorize how queer lives in rural environments disrupt current concepts of rurality and sexuality as well as how this disruption is made visible.



## Chapter 2

### QUESTIONS AND LITERATURE CENTRAL TO MY STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore how rural sex educators create environments that are inclusive to queer students. The primary research questions include:

1. What programs and practices currently exist in rural environments which queer sex education?
2. What are the lived experiences of rural teachers who are – or are attempting to – queering sex education, and how can this inform practice?

In order to have a fuller understanding of the context of these lived experiences, two secondary questions also guide the study. These include “How do rural sex educators create environments which are inclusive to queer students?” and “How do rural sex educators queer narrowly-defined concepts within sex education, such as abstinence, in ways that make them more inclusive?”

The literature review begins with a discussion of sex education policy and curriculum as normative and positive queer students as abnormal. Next the writings of sex educators will be explored in relation to the normalizing practices. Third, the intersection of rurality in relation to queerness and sex education will be explored. Finally, an overview of ethnodrama and other performance-based methodologies will be explored, as the ultimate end result of this research will be an ethnodrama.

## **The Normative Experience of Sex Education**

### **Policy and Curriculum Implications**

The conservative movement within sex education has greatly affected the field and should not be underestimated (Irvine, 2002). This has led to a normalization process related to expectations for youth sexuality which distinctly leaves out queer students. The abstinence-until-marriage movement has led to a normalizing of what is acceptable sexual behavior, and without marriage one's sexual behavior could thus be called "abnormal." Nowhere is this process of normalization better documented than by Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal* (1999).

In this piece, Warner (1999) critiques the assimilation politics of the current sexual agenda in the United States, and this can also be applied to sex education. He theorizes that queers will never truly assimilate, nor should that be a goal, and he focuses on the popular concept of gay marriage as the quickest path to normalcy. He emphasizes that those favoring gay marriage do so either because they view it as a personal choice that should be granted to all citizens or that marriage would help gay culture become more civilized and therefore more acceptable in heterosexual culture. Warner (1999) points out that these two positions both accept the inherent normalcy of queers while simultaneously rejecting that, in order for marriage to be the norm, it creates the abnormal. Marriage currently separates the normal straights from the abnormal queers. He is not negating the issues of equality but instead asking readers to look at the broader implications.

This concept of normalcy also rings true within sex education. Warner (1999) uses the concept of "the politics of sexual shame" (p. viii) to show how variances in sexualities are not recognized under current morality. This enables the heterosexual powerful to relegate queers to spaces which are subject to control, such as the sex education classroom, since part of the stigma

on queers includes a myth of a lack of sexual control. This process of normalization has enormous ramifications for students in the sex education classroom.

In the sex education classroom, this normalization has “a propensity to codify sexual and gender identities as stable categories with fixed meanings” (Rasmussen, 2004, p. 5). Normalcy then becomes evaluative, and in the sex education classroom this leads to students evaluating their own sexual normalcy against an abstinence-until-marriage standard. As Rasmussen (2004) states, a public understanding of queerness as empowered, strong, and sexual would be difficult to handle within a conservative framework.

Campos (2002), Irvine (2002), and Moran (2000) all focus their research on sex education in the United States and how it plays into concepts of normalcy. Although all three of these pieces focus more on the history and curriculum of sex education, their insights also correlate with the normalcy concepts pervasive in Rasmussen (2004) and Warner (1999). Campos utilizes Wolfensberger’s (1972) definition of normalization as a philosophical construct of much of sex education, which he defines as “means which are as culturally normative as possible, in order to establish and/or maintain personal behaviors and characteristics which are as culturally normative as possible” (p. 28). According to Campos, those who follow normalization believe that students will acquire knowledge to live productive and fruitful lives. For the most part, Irvine (2002) agrees with this definition of normalization, and states that this concept is the cornerstone strategy for the Christian Right’s opposition to inclusive sex education. According to Irvine (2002), these battles over normalization are not simply about queerness but “over which sexualities and which citizens are valued as legitimate” (p. 167). The Christian Right’s support of normalization is directly correlated to a desire for protection of the “normal,” or the “preservation of sexual morality, traditional gender relations, and the nuclear family” (Irvine, 2002, p. 168). Campos (2002) believes this attitude toward normalcy harkens back to the attitude of most of the twentieth century, when being queer was perceived as “sick, abnormal, unnatural, perverted, and

an abomination to society” (p. 141). Even though the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its psychiatric disease classification in 1972, the majority of mainstream Americans continue to have concerns over the intersection of family, sexuality, and gender, and the Christian Right is able to play into those concerns by showing how “abnormal” queers are (Irvine, 2002). This has resulted in a moral antipathy in American sentiment towards queer sex education, with the public generally supporting equal rights for queers but not moving much beyond tolerance in relation to actively fighting for those rights (Yang, 1998). Campos (2002) cites the Stonewall Riots, the AIDS crisis, the changing attitudes of queers in film and television, the debates of choice or preference in relation to sexual orientation, the search for a queer gene, debates over gays in the military, and the Boy Scout ban on non-heterosexuals all as examples of the mainstream public’s struggle with normalization.

As previously mentioned, Campos (2002) and Moran’s (2000) work is primarily focused on historical perspectives on sex education, which adds to the normalization literature. They both cite the struggles of the abstinence-only education movement and critical to the normalization, yet they both stand firmly on the side of comprehensive sex education as that which is necessary to develop the critical thinking skills required of students. Generally, Moran (2000) believes the development of the field of sexology correlated being queer with being perverted. At a deeper level, repression is key to maintaining normalcy as required by mainstream sex education. Moran (2000) too believes, similar to Campos (2002), that history has shaped this struggle to normalize which is present in sex education.

Several authors outside of sex education discuss the normalizing effect of sex education as it currently exists. Annamarie Jagose (1996), a noted queer theorist, suggests that the supposed stability of sex within sex education highlights even further the mismatch between lived queer experience and classroom engagement. Jagose (1996) indicates that, whether queer-inclusive or not, any sex education serves to demonstrate “the impossibility of ‘natural’ sexuality...call[ing]

into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as ‘man’ and ‘woman’ (p. 1).” By utilizing a queer pedagogy, educators would be able to transcend the negative effects of normalization on and from the dominant culture. Clearly, her view of sex education is such that students must define central terms, queer them in fact, in order to even begin to realize the instability of the education itself. She also integrates how class and race differences alter this conversation as well.

### **The impact on queer students**

Queer students, or those whose identity or practices highlight the supposedly stable relationship between sex, gender, and sexual desire, have much in common with mainstream American society, but their experiences in the United States vary significantly (Corber & Valocchi, 2003). Queer students come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. However, their experiences are often ignored, or when they are examined it is through a homonormative perspective with queer as a monolithic category.

Estimates on the number of queer people in the United States range from two to ten percent. Therefore strategic educational alliances with allies to the queer movement are critical, but the search for these allies too often results in a desexualization of queer youth in the quest for normalcy and respectability (Warner, 1999). However Talburt, Rofes, and Rasmussen (2004) find this quest for normalcy to be troubling for two reasons.

First, [the quest for normalization] allows normative cultural values to leak over into queer spaces and drive out the queerest of queers. For examples, those queers who organize their sexual practices or gender performances outside the range of heteronorms can be seen as recalcitrant traitors to the cause, unwilling to make the appropriate sacrifices for the sake of inclusion. This affects, in particular, those youth who do not conform to traditional sex roles or who insist on the right to bodily autonomy and sexual pleasure. Second, it encourages a vision of cultural pluralism that is only tolerant if certain distinctions are reined in or vanished. Hence the gay male football captain might

come out and receive support from his peers, even as the queer in the drama club continues to be taunted (p. 5).

Michael Warner (1999) extensively discusses the concept of normalcy as standardization in current educational thought. In educational discourse, he views normal as something which is certified, approved, and meeting a set of standards (hence why teachers' colleges were called normal schools). There is a sense of judgment inherent in this normalization, often unconsciously in the classroom environment, which has deep impact on queer students (Warner, 1999).

Therefore, "normal" becomes a form of evaluation linked to standards and behaviors. Yet as young queers "become somebody," they play with these norms, often intersecting negatively with concepts of society, institution, and individuality (Wexler, 1992). In turn, the public has typically labeled queer youth by focusing on pathology, labeling them "at risk" for disease, addiction, mental health issues, homelessness, violence, and educational attainment (Talbert, Rofes, & Rasmussen, 2004).

In relation to sex education, the imprecision of normalizing concepts also make sex education curricular interventions assumptive regarding queer students and how sexuality is categorized (Irvine, 1995). Specifically, instruction about sexuality is often essentialist in which people are placed into categories, or judged by conformity with those standards. Moreover, categories like "heterosexual" and "queer," if they are taught, are taught as "real" rather than concepts developed approximately a hundred years ago to create standards of normalcy. This creates a disconnect for queer students when they feel as if they don't have a category (which may, in fact, be precisely the point).

"Whereas essentialists regard identity as natural, fixed, and innate, constructionists assume identity is fluid, the effect of social conditioning and available cultural models for understanding oneself" (Jagose, 1996, p. 8). Therefore, an essentialist, or normative, educational system, such as the one we have in the United States, assumes sexuality to be culture

independent, objective, and intrinsic, whereas queer constructionist believe it is entirely culturally dependent, relative, and not objective (Stein, 1992). A constructionist view recognizes that identity is not an empirical category but a process of identification (Jagose, 1996). Therefore, for queer students, what is missing is the feeling of being limited, of having to choose either straight or gay as the only options (Altman, 1972), although contemporary sex education is not helpful as queer students struggle beyond these binaries. In order for queer-inclusive education to occur, educators and students must engage in examining how some groups are “othered” in society, how some groups are privileged, and how both these processes are maintained by social structures and ideologies (Kumashiro, 2002).

Schools are an integral part of society, and understanding how schools can contribute to making queer students abnormal requires examining the relationship between schools and other social institutions (Stambach, 1999). Understanding this oppression requires moving beyond an emphasis on homophobia and into discussions of heteronormativity and how concepts of normal perpetuate queer oppressions (Britzman, 1998). Numerous studies have shown that schools do not stand outside of these oppressive structures, innocent to the dynamics of them, but instead transmit ideologies, hegemonies, and social order (Althusser, 1971; Gramsci, 1971; Kumashiro, 2002).

Educational endeavors in the United States focus almost exclusively on the heterosexual experience. Hence, anything outside of these norms continues to be “othered,” and school-aged youth are typically expected to conform to these standards. In the words of Kumashiro (2002),

...Although a curriculum that aims for inclusion may succeed in teaching that the Other is as normal or important as the norm, it does not necessarily change the very definition of ‘normal’ and ways in which we traditionally see ourselves as such. In other words, adding difference does not really change teaching and learning practices that affirm our sense of normalcy (p. 57).

This othering is pervasive, according to Kumashiro (2001), for students come to school typically with two types of knowledge about queers – that which is either incomplete or that which is biased. Lack of knowledge or biased knowledge itself often involves a separate type of othering, one in which dominant groups (the “us”) educate on the non-dominant group (the “them”) because the powerful (the “we”) know best (Felman & Laub, 1992; Ellsworth, 1997; Kumashiro, 2001). However, in some ways, “the institutional regulation of [queer] forms of identity also suggests on some level the dominant society recognizes that there is no natural relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality and that it must vigorously enforce the belief that there is” (Corber and Valocchi, 2003, p. 9).

In the case of queer students, they are constantly challenging the boundaries and standards of “normal” sex, gender, and sexuality. These students force educational institutions to explore the discursive power of the norm, or at least to ignore the implications which reside in their abnormality. Conversely, I want to make it clear that not all queer students are victimized or oppressed by this abnormal label, for many queer students are able to subvert these experiences into experiences of pleasure, and thus the vulnerability their position as queer students places on them actually becomes a powerful place of agency (Blackburn, 2004). Often, however, current discussions of queer youth focus almost solely on victim literature (Eaton, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1994; Unks, 1995; Youth Voices, 1996; Britzman, 1998, 1995; Murray, 1998; Owens, 1998; Rofes, 2005; Gray, 2009). The queer identity is often one utilized to reclaim power, and it is important not to stay focused only on victimization. Queer students often buck this common discourse, or way of being, which Gee (1996) defines as a “sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize” (p. 127).



### **Teacher responses to the injustice of normalizing practices**

There are many teachers who are discontent with the status quo and actively work to overcome normalizing practices (Dejean, 2001). Unfortunately, many of these practices in relation to queer students have not been documented, so unearthing them can be quite a challenge. According to Irvine (1995), educators can learn to be more receptive to these normative practices by utilizing a five step methodology. First, she encourages educators to acknowledge and confront discomfort regarding queerness. Second, obtain knowledge of the patterns of the majority culture, to help overcome universal assumptions. Third, obtain knowledge of minority cultures, like queer culture. Fourth, become aware of power inequities and the history of queer discrimination. Finally, develop competency across queer culture by continually enhancing knowledge and showing respect for queer culture. Even researching as far back as Kinsey, (1948) opens educators up to the idea that “there is no American pattern of sexual behavior, but scores of patterns ,each of which is confined to a particular segment of our society” (p. 329).

Oftentimes it is assumed that educators do not think critically about their fields, instead blindly following state standards for education. However, many teachers are driven to learn more within the field of sex education, particularly because they may not have had any (or have had very limited) training within the field (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2006; Radcliffe & Mandeville, 2007; Klein & Breck, 2010). For many teachers, teaching sex education becomes another “piece” of their teaching duties, so for the health educator it may be a component of a health class, and for a biology teacher it may be included as a unit in reproduction.

Teachers’ lack of training in sexuality often helps them feel unprepared to teach, so for many they must learn on their own or after degree attainment. Preparation for general education

teachers in the area of sexuality varies widely from state to state (Summerfield, 2001). Therefore, teachers' education in this field varies widely. However, one common approach is through cultural analysis of sexuality (Irvine, 1995). According to Irvine (1995), a social construction approach allows educators to acknowledge sexual identities as they are conceived today as "necessary fictions," thereby both acknowledging that these categories exist but also acknowledging that sexual identities do not tell us much, if anything, about a person or that person's behaviors. This approach is often embraced by educators in search of information they have not received in their training. Teachers often begin their search for sexuality information through the need to develop safe spaces for students with questions, particularly queer students (Kumashiro, 2002).

More and more educators desire to address their students as diverse, with unique race, gender, and class experiences. For one educator in Kumashiro's (2002) study, his desire to learn more about queer students came through an experience in the classroom.

This brought a whole new dimension to my frame of thinking. I'm not sure what it is but information like this gets my mind going. It has been true for me that when I had to work through a crisis, I grew and gained from the experience like no other time in my life (Kumashiro, 2002, pp. 7-8).

This experience inspired the educator to seek out new knowledge in reaction to not comprehending a new experience.

Thoughtful teacher educators who write about their attempts to incorporate sexuality and gender identification into the curriculum by countering the normalization of heterosexuality have acknowledged the challenges while also questioning the effectiveness of their efforts. Their common approach is "queering" the curriculum. This critical pedagogy is not about reifying rigid notions of a normative dichotomous sexuality between hetero and gay/lesbian, but instead focuses on deconstructing and decentering normative heterosexuality. The purpose of this approach is to help education students, especially the majority heterosexual population, to examine how their own sense of sexuality and gender identification is imbued with various degrees of compulsory heterosexuality and the resultant problematic effects this can have for *all* young people at various stages of identity development (Vavrus, 2008).

This queering on behalf of teachers is acknowledgement of what Banks (1993) calls positionality, where aspects of identity are viewed in relational positions rather than essential qualities. This approach, which was utilized in combating institutional racism, can also be applied to a queer approach where heteronormativity is made plain. Macintosh (2007) also questions how schools can move into queer education, or beyond antihomophobia education, and deconstruct the mythic heterosexual norm (Asher, 2007).

Vavrus (2008) initiated a study with teachers to help educators address issues of sexuality and gender and to consider the pedagogical implications for their learning. In this study, he had educators reflect on their own experiences, and five themes emerged – gender identification, normalization of sexuality, sex education, middle school experiences, and teacher complicity. All teachers in this study had heard homophobic comments in their schooling that had gone unchallenged, and this aligns with Asher's (2007) idea that the sexuality (along with race and gender) need to be brought to the forefront of a multiculturally sensitive education.

Teachers who have felt hindered by the normative effective of traditional sex education have typically attempted to counteract this normativity through adapting the classroom environment, changing the curriculum (if possible), and acknowledging their own fears. All of the teachers in Vavrus' (2008) study envisioned creating safe and open classrooms that encouraged respectful dialogue, to help address homophobia. Teachers can also combat the audit culture which surround queer issues by shaping them in the context of social citizenship, particularly sexual citizenship (Alldred & David, 2007). Through this type of approach, teachers, particularly teachers who work collectively, have taken steps to counteract the hegemony of silence that continues the naturalization of heterosexuality (Vavrus, 2008).

Educators respond to heteronormative practices in a variety of ways beyond just traditional teaching, including addressing discrimination towards queer relationships, disrupting heteronormative discourse, and providing alternatives beyond heterosexual relationships, to name

a few (Robinson & Ferfolo, 2007). Queer theorists, such as Pinar (1998) and Talburt, Rofes, and Rasmussen (2004) have challenged heteronormative pedagogies, highlighting the importance of queer theory in understanding sexuality and how it plays out in school settings (Robinson & Ferfolo, 2007). This is reinforced for teachers by educational structures which “other” certain sexualities, and hence mark these “others” as relevant only to members of “underrepresented” groups, particularly through a deviance discourse. Teachers are often complicit in continuing this discourse due to the stigma of deviance attached with changing – or even evoking – the conversation. However, as seen above, there are teachers and researchers working to rectify this situation.

### **Queer students and teachers in rural environments**

Gray (2009) offers a perspective of rural queer America which is not the most inclusive, an example of which can be seen in the Boyd County High School struggle to establish a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). While this study does not focus on the establishment of GSAs, this particular situation is one which is not uncommon in rural districts. These battles are, on the surface, over the establishment of a GSA, but are also about who is deemed “legitimate” in society (Irvine, 2002). In addition, general community intolerance is more challenging to combat in a rural environment than in an urban environment, often due merely to the size of the community (Miceli, 2005). Teachers and students have struggled in rural environments to create queer-inclusive spaces.

Gray (2009) focuses on the lack of attention paid to queer issues in rural schools, often related to national queer organizations not having much interest in work beyond urban center, due to the class assumptions built into their strategies. The strategies of many of the national organizations (such as GLSEN) presume that a local community knows best how to fight battles

locally (Micelli, 2005; ACLU, 2003; Tarrow, 1994; Lo, 1982; Mottl, 1980; Blumer, 1971). Gray (2009) posits that while this is typically true, it assumes a local power base on equal footing with the schools and with the finances to support the fight, as others have mentioned (Miceli, 2005; ACLU, 2003). Gray (2009) offers insight into the role schools play in rural communities by positing that they serve as public spaces where skirmishes over queer citizenship become transformed into a reflection of community values. Gray positions queer peoples' struggles in a rural community as a dynamic interaction between locality/community and the vulnerable space contained within citizenship. Furthermore, she challenges that rural spaces, which often deal with a very limited visible presence of difference, not only struggle with queerness but also the intersections with class and race. In addition, Gray feels studying rural queerness, particularly in education, offers challenges for traditional youth identity models, for rural queer youth depend on both non-queer allies for support in ways non-rural queers do not. Developing a rural queer identity, for students, is dependent on adult participation in the construction of identity and community, according to Gray.

From his perspective, Rofes' (2004) model of Martyr-Target-Victim has specifically been applied in the context of queer youth in schools, but works particularly well for rural youth. The Martyr-Target-Victim model posits that queers are offered three types of perspectives, the Martyr, like Matthew Shephard; the Target, those who are subject to harassment and bullying; and the Victim, those who have been affected by harassment and bullying. This model, although only applied in queer contexts, mirrors much of the previous ways in which underrepresented students were pathologized (Polite and Davis, 1999). Similar to Rofes, Polite and Davis take into account the intersections of race and geography (in their case urban environments) and how structures pathologize African American urban youth. Rofes insinuates that this emphasis on the problems of queer rural life has often obscured the agency and resiliency of rural queers by consistently breaking rural queers into groups of victims or survivors via the perpetuation of the Martyr-

Target-Victim model (Rofes, 2004). There is a need to focus on the skills and strategies found in rural environments to balance the victim literature which is so readily available. Rofes emphasizes the need for balance to counterbalance the current Martyr-Target-Victim focus, so theorists do not continue to reiterate a victim status, or the “lack” of agency so present in current urban queer thought.

### **The silence of rural queerness**

Many researchers have pointed out the silence in relation to rurality in queerness within research (Whitlock, 2009; Halberstam, 2003; Corber & Valocchi, 2003; Bell, 2000), but Halberstam (2003) emphasizes the urban/rural continuum as “the lost binary” in queerness. Halbertstam (2003) offers that “very little attention has been paid to date to the specificities of rural queer lives” (p. 162). According to Halberstam, most work within community and sexuality has focused on urban environments and exhibits disinterests in non-metropolitan sexualities. Therefore, within queer theory, all positions are urban-centric and assumptive of urbanity. David Bell (2000) argues that rural spaces are portrayed as either hostile or idyllic, making the implication that rural communities invest in conformity whereas urban communities thrive upon differences (Halberstam, 2003). While this may make sense in theory, Halberstam (2003) indicates “we might find that rural environments nurture elaborate sexual cultures even while sustaining surface social and political conformity” (p. 162). Rural life is often mythologized by urban queer researchers as sad or lonely, or a place where queers get stuck. This leads to metronormativity, which is pervasive throughout queer research. Metronormativity gives a “normalizing power” to one perspective (the urban) which focuses on coming out and “migration” either from a rural space to an urban space or from heterosexual life in the city to

queer life in the city” (Halberstam, 2003, p. 163). The construction of queer identity as metropolitan plays itself out, according to Halberstam (2003), as

formulaic accounts of rural sexual identity involve a story of coming to consciousness in relation to the discovery of materials or community in an urban setting. The rural queer, within this standardized narrative, emerges from the dark night of a traditional closeted world and blooms in the sunshine of modern gay urban life. In reality, many rural queers yearn to leave the city and return to their small towns and many recount complicated stories of love, sex and community in their small town lives which belie the closet model (p. 163).

These ideas are particularly important because they acknowledge how little attention researchers pay to rural queer life. Howard (1999) highlights four linear movements of focus which move in a chronological fashion in the urban queer continuum – desire, identity, community, and political movement – which practically exclude the rural queer experience. Others have also discussed this silence in rural queer studies (Whitlock, 2009; Gray, 2009).

Rural queerness is as multiple and varied as there are rural queers, yet prevailing images of rural queer lives distort and discount lived experiences by focusing almost exclusively on the Martyr-Target-Victim model of Rofes (2004). These are not accurate portrayals, but accurate portrayals are not available in current research. We rely on these stories, Halberstam (2003) notes, “rather than finding out about the queer people who live quietly if not comfortably in isolated areas or small towns all across North America” (p. 164). Therefore, by telling stories from people who are living and working in these rural communities, we will better understand the complexities of rural queer life.

## **Performing Research**

### **Research beyond the page**

Thinking of research as performance is useful because it draws our attention to the roles played in society and the effects of these interactions. Queer theory itself, as a theory based on the social interactions of humans, or the performance humans have with one another, also lends itself to exploring research realms beyond the page. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) think a performative turn has been taken in the social sciences. In their minds, the social sciences have moved from textually-based ethnographies to the performative. Conquergood (1998) recognizes that performances contribute to a pluralism that challenges existing ways of knowing and representing research. In his opinion, performances are more inclusionary forms of research and are particularly well suited for cultural practices outside of the “norm,” like queerness. Performances insist on immediacy and involvement by the observer (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Performances “consist of partial, plural, incomplete, and contingent understandings, not the analytic distance of detachment, the hallmarks of the textual and positivist paradigms” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. ix). The position of performing research, in the case of this research, is to position oneself queerly in relation to the familiar way of knowing oneself and one’s understanding of research. The obsession for truth in research becomes personal, as performance acknowledges the uncertainty of anything beyond a personal truth. The observer is compelled to reconsider what she believes to know about research, and about herself, after looking at a queer performance.

Goffman (1959) dealt extensively with the concept of performance in the lives of individuals. He defines performance as “the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has



some influence on the observers” (Goffman, 1959, p. 22). Therefore, in his view a performance relies on the identification of participants. However, participants are only identified when they move through the performance – otherwise, they are not visible. The subjects of a performance are defined as such by their behavior in a setting. Within the performance, Goffman delineates various “interactors,” including the participants, the audience, and the observer. With this he is delineating a “reality” around a performance. Therefore, for Goffman, a performance does not depend solely on participants but on others who create a performance, meaning an audience and an observer. Therefore, a performance is not a performance without others watching it.

In his 2000 work, Denzin indicates he considers our culture a performance-based, dramaturgical one. He believes the dividing line between performer and audience member blurs, and culture itself becomes the drama. Performance itself then becomes reality. In the words of Butler (1990), in relation to gender as performance “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the dead....identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (p. 25). In this way, culture and language are inseparable from performance. The converse also holds true, in that performance is inseparable from culture and language (considering that language is not always merely spoken). Cultural participants enact culture and use language to articulate performances. One could even question whether individuals exist in a culture without these performances. Denzin (2000) borrows from Butler when he explains “the linguistic act is performative, and words can hurt” (p. 903).

To contextualize this to research, performing is resisting the “normal,” just as queer theory is resisting the “natural,” making the two a strong blend. A performance is not a replication of what is observed but rather an interpretation of it. Many contemporary playwrights working in performance-based research have informed my work. For what it is worth, I consider the act of writing this dissertation a performance of my work as well.

Patricia Hill Collins, noted African American feminist researcher and scholar, has “suggested [that] the meanings of lived experiences are inscribed and sometimes made visible in...performances” (Denzin, 2000, p. 903). In a performance, researchers have the ability to revisit fragments of their own interpretations of the participants’ actions and words, which requires a constant recognition of the researcher’s role in creating the piece. These works can then be examined and compared to individuals’ lived experiences and the applicability of the research/piece to others’ lived experiences.

Performance must include the deliberate choice to show what is, has, ought to, or could be (Schechner, 2002). Performance is more than simply doing research. It is showing the doing of research and the impact this has on participants. A reflexive response is vital to the process. To explain further, “reflexive, critical stories that feel the sting of memory, stories that enact liminal experiences...are storied retellings that seek the truth of life’s fictions via evocation rather than explanation or analysis” (Denzin, 2000, p. 905). In relation to my research, I consider performance to be a presentation of “twice-behaved behavior” (Schechner, 2002; Denzin, 2001). The exchanges in my work were in response to an online performance in a focus group. These performances existed solely to answer questions which I posed, and sometimes others posed, and to explore queerness in the classroom with the participants.

Queerness and performing research are not easily defined in the traditional “what is it?” way. To understand both, one must dig beneath the surface to understand what it is to live an experience. To understand both, one must be actively engaged. Therefore, performing research requires active engagement of me, the researcher, and is no more or less valid than research which results in written performance only. My role is not to determine who had the “best” performance within my research but rather to explore how the roles the participants played influence their ability to integrate queerness into their sex education classrooms. “What is or is not performance does not depend on an event in itself but on how that event is received and

placed” (Schechner, 2002, p. 31). By developing a performance piece, I am placing a participant’s experiences in a context in which it would not naturally occur (meaning an online focus group of disparate self-described sex educators from around the country). This research is a performance of a culture which exists solely for the purpose of this research, and hence is a performance in itself. Although the initial output of the dissertation is in a more traditional format, the ultimate goal, the thought which is pervasive in my mind, is that I will be performing this again. However, I believe it to be critical to note that I was encouraged NOT to perform by my committee as I moved through my process during the dissertation phase of the research simply for expediency purposes, to which I acquiesced. This acknowledges Saldana’s (2005) words, “the ‘reality-based’ mounting of human life onstage is a risky enterprise” (p.32). However, I believe those passionate about education understanding the risks are worth it in order to truly engage with research. The opportunities to “know” within these risky space are the same spaced which allow us to “know” our own queerness.

Many in the social science have recognized the usefulness of performance as a research medium. Gergen and Gergen (2000) insist there is an increased interest in the move toward performance as a mode of research and representation.

This move is justified by the notion that if the distinction between fact and fiction is largely a matter of textual tradition, as the validity critiques suggest, then forms of scientific writing are not the only mode of expression that might be employed. Although visual aids such as film and photography have also been accepted as a means of ‘capturing reality,’ they have generally been viewed as auxiliary modes within written traditions. However, when we realize that the communicative medium itself has a formative effect on what we take to be the object of research, the distinction between film as recording device as opposed to performance is blurred. And with this blurring, investigators are invited into considering the entire range of communicative expression in the arts and entertainment world – graphic arts, video, drama, dance, magic, multimedia, and so on – as forms of research and presentation. Again, in moving toward performance the investigator avoids the mystifying claims of truth and simultaneously expands the range of communities in which the work can stimulate dialogue (p. 1029).

My study is influenced by a confluence of fields, including ethnodrama, ethnography, queer theory, education, rural studies, and feminist theory. Sex education is the actual setting of

this research, but that field is influenced by all of the above fields as well within this context. I view the sex education classroom as a performance, and the participation in an online focus group as a performance as well. This pulling apart and reconfiguring is critical to my work. In this way I am invested and re-invested in my work. Like all feminist analysis, I acknowledge my role in this process, and may even perform it again for others. For this reason, I focus on performance. I look at motives for words and phrases, and code them accordingly in a dramatic fashion. However, to understand this requires further understanding of how to use ethnodrama. Since this is a new concept for many, I will now delve into the literature surrounding dramatic forms of research.

### **Dramatic forms of research**

In relation to research, drama is most frequently used as a part of ethnography. Dramatic research can blend a variety of techniques, from realistic to sensual to vocal to silent. Oftentimes the emotional content of the material determines the suitability of a topic for a dramatic retelling. However, in the words of Richardson (2000), “constructing drama raises the postmodern debates about ‘oral’ and ‘written’ texts.’ Which comes first?” (p. 934). In contemporary research literature, written research is privileged as the more “legitimate.” However, why the distance between an oral presentation and a written? Both originate from lived experience, follow rigorous standards for research and coding, are ethically viable, and then presented for an audience (of course, this only holds true in the case of that research which follows appropriate protocol).

Dramatic presentations of research have been linked to the futurist, Dadaist, and surrealist movements (Richardson, 2000). However, the modern conceptualization is often called “popular theatre,” which is defined as “a process of theatre which deeply involves specific communities in

identifying issues of concern, analyzing current conditions and causes of the situation, identifying points of change, and analyzing how change could happen and/or contributing to the actions implied” (Prentki & Selman, 2000, p.8). Theatrical methods of research are all based in qualitative research and specifically linked to narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) along with other arts-based or alternative ways of knowing (Irwin and deCosson, 2004). A postmodern approach towards “truth” and how knowledge is produced has legitimized dramatic forms of research in the social sciences (Conrad, 2004). Dramatic forms of research have been used as a research method, to write a script, to guide a performance, and to gather participant responses to research to help with additional layers of interpretation (Conrad, 2004; Saldana, 2009, 2005, 2005a). Denzin (1997) calls dramatic forms of research “the single most powerful way for ethnography to recover yet interrogate the meanings of lived experience” (p. 94).

The roots of dramatic forms of research can be found in anthropology as well as communication studies, where performing text has been regarded as a legitimate form of research. As a dramatic researcher, I am searching, through my observations and interpretation, to make meaning which can be transformed to a dramatic setting. Through my research, participants’ insights into their lived experiences lead to an understanding of their culture, which is in turn presented to an audience to add their own insights. Dramatic forms of research “deliberately create opportunities for exploration through performance or ‘acting out’” (Conrad, 2004, p. 16). In this sense, it offers an alternative way of knowing, of accessing and presenting knowledge, which moves beyond the simply cognitive. The audience interaction with the drama allows for the opportunity for the transformed of knowledge which has already been transformed through the dramatic development process.

## **How to use ethnodrama**

Many in theatre and the social sciences have written and theorized about blurring genres and the implication for interpretation, performance, and the everyday (Saldana, 2009, 2005, 2005a; Schechner, 2002; Mienczakowski, 2001; Denzin, 2001, 2000, 1997; Goodall, 2000; Conquergood, 1998; Berg, 1995; Goffman, 1959). Ethnotheatre, the creation of a performance medium through research, and ethnodrama, the creation of the written script for performance (Saldana, 2005a), represents a relatively recent movement in qualitative inquiry in an experimental turn in relation to research representation (Denzin, 2001, 2000, 1997; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Sparkes, 2000; Jipson and Paley, 1997). Prominent methodologists in qualitative inquiry have constructed research representation and presentation as a performance and have encouraged experiments within the dramatic form (Denzin, 2001). Whereas the term “performance” has broad implications for how something is “performed,” ethnotheatre and the mounting of any theatrical production are both hard work. The symbolic engagement of an audience with a piece of work allows for an aesthetically enriching and reflective experience for those who partake of well-developed research.

My unique experiences and training in both theatre and education are of note here. One of the challenges in the creation of ethnodramas is the lack of two-way training by most creators – either social scientists without performance training who write scripts that are dialogically sound but face limited staging option, or theatrical professionals who can perform a piece beautifully but may have limited exposure to research methodology (Saldana, 2005). In my case, I have training in both. I hold a Bachelor of Music degree and have hundreds of performance credentials in theatre and musical theatre, including professional and amateur acting and directing experiences, as well as experience writing performance pieces. In addition, I am trained as a teacher and researcher, having taught in the public schools and obtaining advanced degrees in

education, making me uniquely qualified to work in both media. Writing for the stage is similar to creating a narrative in qualitative inquiry, yet fundamentally different due to language changes in creating pieces for theatrical production. As a researcher, what makes excellent research material to me may not make excellent dramatic material, and vice versa. It is critical at all times that I remember theatre's primary motive – "to entertain ideas as it entertains its spectators" (Saldana, 2005a, p. 14).

Initial analysis for an ethnodrama includes reducing study transcripts to a significantly shorter length for core content examination, linking participant data for triangulation, and using in vivo coding for category development (Saldana, 2005a). From there the distinct category, or themes, can be developed into different scenes, which may be based on chronology. In addition, it is appropriate to intersperse personal recollections from field notes and other writings. "The basic content for ethnodrama is the reduction of field notes, interview transcripts, journal entries, etc. to salient, foreground issues – the 'juicy stuff' for 'dramatic impact'" (Saldana, 2005a, p. 16). This process generates structural plot and contextual story line materials for script construction. This highly prescriptive model of Saldana's (2005a) provides a solid framework for structuring a drama.

Characters in ethnodramas are typically research participants, but they may also be representations of external persons or factors. These characters can be explored via what develops in interviews, field notes of the researcher, observational or secondary interview data, and from research literature (Saldana, 2005a). These may be presented as a solo work with one performer or an ensemble piece with a polyphonic approach (Mieniczakowski, 2001). However, for validity sake, Mieniczakowski (2001) also recommends that no fictional characters, dialogue, or scenarios be permitted unless they are validated by participants and researchers and reasonable admissions and typical to the scenarios being presented. Some ethnodramatists have also opted to

present formal research articles, textual script/poetic representation, and onstage adaptations to allow maximum flexibility with creative expression (Saldana, 2005a).

Another challenge which arises is the researcher's role in the ethnodrama. Is the researcher a leading character, a leading character's best friend, a Greek chorus member, an offstage voice, a servant who directs guests, an extra in the background, or an unnecessary character who has been cut from the play (Saldana, 2005a)? All of these techniques have been employed in the creation of past ethnodramas, and the researcher must be clear in her motives for inclusion of the researcher in the piece. In addition, scenography must be considered in the script construction, since plays are meant to be performed before audiences. Scenography "refers to the total visual and aural conception for the theatrical productions and includes the constituent elements of scenery, set and properties, costumes, makeup, lighting, sound, and technology" (Saldana, 2005a, pp. 27-28).

The literature reviewed in this chapter identifies the need for an investigation of the ways in which rural sex educators create environments which are inclusive to queer students. What follows in the next chapter is an explanation of this study's components.



### Chapter 3

## RESEARCH APPROACH

This study was designed to learn more about rural educators' perceptions of queer-inclusive sex education and of the way, if any, in which their environments influenced their teaching choices and efforts. This study utilizes a qualitative research framework and, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), qualitative research focuses on the social construction of reality, the relationship of the researcher to the researched, emphasizes the values present in inquiry, and focuses on answering questions on how social experiences are created and made meaningful. Accordingly, qualitative research was the most appropriate form of research for this study as I was clarifying the perceptions held by sex educators about how they create inclusive environments for queer students. Further, mixing qualitative research with queer theory allows for the investigating of how group boundaries are created, negotiated, and changed, including those of the researcher and the researched (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). A qualitative approach grounded in queer theory also allows for me to remain skeptical about the "stability and literal reality of the social categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender" (Gamson, 2000, p. 348). Gamson (2000) also suggests that qualitative research is the most appropriate method for addressing this skepticism due to a

well-founded suspicion that positivist sciences, and some scientific professions, have been at odds with the interests of self-defining homosexuals – pathologizing, stigmatizing, seeking the 'cause' of deviant sexualities and, by implication, their cure (p. 348).

This study maintained the integrity of and respect for queer subjects by respecting sex educators' multiple ways of constructing their own knowledge and their students' (and their own, potentially) queer sexualities.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of qualitative research in general; a review of ethnographic frameworks, including performance ethnography, autoethnography, ethnotheatre, ethnodrama; and a small section on phenomenology.

### **Why Qualitative Research?**

Postmodernism “challenges all ‘grand theory’ and all claims for a singular, correct style for organizing and presenting knowledge” (Richardson, 1997, p. 13). Ideas are borrowed in an interdisciplinary fashion which leads to a “blurring of genres” (Richardson, 1997, p. 13).

Postmodernism challenges that all theories and ideas are created in a context, and ignoring that context glosses over the true meaning behind the experience. Postmodernism also allows for a deconstruction of quantitative and qualitative research, valuing equally the sociological impact of time, place, and location on a researcher along with why, when, and how a study is done.

Postmodernism calls into question whom research really represents – the “subject(s)” being studied or the researchers’ own biases. This opening of the field of research continually allows for the questioning of research, which has been deemed a “crisis” by many scholars (Richardson, 1997; Marcus and Fisher, 1986; Fiske and Schweder, 1986; Mills, 1959). However, Richardson (1997) embraces this “crisis” by stating “[w]hen there is a crisis of representation we are freed from the intellectual myopia of hyperdetermined research projects and their formulaic write-ups...” (p. 14). This uncertainty creates opportunity.

My involvement in postmodernism has led me to qualitative research, for qualitative research allows me to be present in my research, openly and overtly. I admit my role in my work.

If values do enter into every inquiry, then the question immediately arises as to what values and whose values shall govern. If the findings of studies can vary depending on the values chosen, then the choice of a particular value system tends to empower and enfranchise certain persons while disempowering and disenfranchising others. Inquiry thereby becomes a political act (Guba, 1990, p. 24).

There are several reasons why qualitative research was the logical choice for this study. First, in qualitative research the researcher is acknowledged as a present and viable research instrument. I was looking for a method that would allow me to value and include my own development while uncovering the meanings my participants bring to their life experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). However, I acknowledge that through this uncovering I, the researcher, use my own filters to interpret, and hence it is critical to acknowledge my role in the research process. I am drawn to Janesick's (2000) metaphor of the researcher as choreographer, as I "refuse to separate art from the ordinary experience" (p. 380). Similar to a choreographer, I cannot be separated from what is danced, and as a researcher I cannot separate myself from my methodology. Remaining engaged, and being inseparable from my research, allows me to remain reflexive throughout. Reflexivity allows me to acknowledge my situation, my personal investments, my biases, my surprises, my choice of rhetoric, and my challenges (Gergen and Gergen, 2000). As the choreographer to my research, it is critical that I acknowledge how my perspective affects the researching. The dance between my participants and me as researcher is inseparable, and must be acknowledged. Reflexivity draws attention to the relationship between the creation of knowledge and the context of the process of creation of knowledge while also acknowledging the creator of this knowledge, or the researcher (Alversson & Skoldberg, 2009). Through a reflexive approach, I can constantly assess the relationship between knowledge and the ways of making meaning (Alversson & Skoldberg, 2009; Calas and Smirich, 1992).

In addition to my own perspective, qualitative research allows me to bring to life the meanings participants make of their own life experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). With this in mind, I want to explore how my participants make sense of an experience. This helps me to truly understand what is happening. I do this by being an active participant myself, through the creation of communicative relationships, by building ongoing dialogue, and expanding

opportunities for deliberation (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). In this way I make a connection with my participants, which was critical to my work, for as a queer researcher myself, I wanted to feel confident I was questioning and deconstructing an unreflexive, unified vision of rural queer students, and this can only be done through a communicative process which allows participants to speak freely and openly (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). As demonstrated in my literature review earlier, queer theory creates spaces for multiple discourses on queer people, and an open research environment was the only way to create this space for my participants (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

All qualitative research seeks understanding of data within a context, while methods vary within qualitative research. However, all forms of research follow six similar strategies in the creation of knowledge, including coding data, recording reflections, sorting through the data for commonalities, seeking patterns, elaborating on a set of generalizations, and confronting generalizations with a formal construct (Richards & Morse, 2007). There are three main approaches to qualitative research, and each approach varies how the six strategies mentioned above are handled and how the end result looks, but it is critical to understand that all three approaches retain these six strategies. The three major approaches are phenomenology, focusing on relationships to things, people, events, and situations; ethnography, which explores meaning for cultural groups; and grounded theory, focusing on reality as constantly being negotiated by people (Richards & Morse, 2007). Of course, there are many other approaches, ranging from narrative inquiry to conversation analysis to life history, but regardless of approach all share the six similar strategies mentioned above. An ethnographic approach was selected for this study.

## **Frameworks that Shaped this Work**

### **An Overview of Ethnographic Frameworks**

Looking for a research methodology where the participants' voices were heard as well my own, I turn to an ethnographic framework. Ethnography is defined as

a social scientific description of a people and the cultural basis of their peoplehood....thought to be atheoretical, to be concerned solely with description....However, the observations of the ethnographer are always guided by world images that determine which data are salient and which are not... (Viditch & Lyman, 2000, p.40).

Using ethnography as a guiding framework has a strong immediate appeal to me, for “it combines research design, fieldwork, and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically, and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of human lives” (Tedlock, 2000, p. 455). Its placement somewhere between lived experience and societal expectations appealed to me within the field of sex education, since the classroom reality is greatly hindered and helped by mechanisms outside the control of the classroom. An ethnographic framework appeared to give me a place to hang my hat, as a researcher, for my role was critical.

Using an ethnographic framework has great appeal when attempting to understand educators and others within an educational environment. First, an ethnographic framework allows closeness with people, events, and natural occurrences in classrooms. Second, this framework allows me to give attention to unanticipated consequences for social actions. It allows me to continue to pursue why events unfold in a particular order. Third, examining lived classroom experiences allows me to consider different motivations for actions within these settings. For example, some situations may be motivated by the educator's own aims, others by

the need to create a situation to influence results, and others from circumstances outside of the teacher's own control, like district pressures or federal requirements (Krueger, 1987).

### ***The Influence of Performance Ethnography***

Within this ethnographic framework, I am specifically interested in working within performance ethnography. Denzin (2000) recognizes performance ethnography as “a gendered culture with nearly invisible boundaries separating everyday theatrical performances from formal theatre, dance, music, MTV, video, and film” (p. 903). One of the main arguments of performance ethnographers is that scientific writing is not the only form of expression that can be used in research. It goes beyond using performative means as an auxiliary to scientific writing but as the means of telling the story itself.

It has been challenging for me as a researcher to sit still. I feel very passionately about my work and my interest in queer studies, and I feel very strongly that research should be shared in the most palatable way possible. For some, reading an essay is not the most engaging task. Within an ethnographic framework, I have the opportunity to share actual stories, which makes engagement a bit easier for some. However, I knew there had to be a way to perform my research, to have it embodied visually, and I therefore became very interested performance ethnography, particularly the fields of a/r/tography and ethnodrama. I desire to utilize the three kinds of thought articulated by Aristotle – knowing, doing, and making (Irwin, 2004) - to help both myself and others create meaning of new ideas. The arts are a natural place for such integration, and I continue to experiment with new ways of presenting and representing research data (Irwin, 2004). This type of work is recognized in the field or a/r/tography.

***A/r/tography: Acknowledging the multiplicity of self in my research***

A/r/tography recognizes academics who acknowledge themselves as Artist/Researcher/Teacher, as I do. A/r/tography and performance ethnography both have a basis in arts-based educational research. Some forms are theatrical, some are provocative, whereas others are poetic (Richardson, 2000). Both performance ethnography and a/r/tography, however, takes seriously arts-based research methodologies. In the words of Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2005), both “create openings, they displace meaning, and they allow for slippages. Loss, shift, and rupture create presence through absence, they become tactile, felt, and seen” (p. 898). I cannot experience Aristotle’s three kinds of thought (Irwin, 2004) without integrating my knowing with my doing and my making, by experiences the ruptures from this integration. The borders between these three areas are constantly being transgressed and, similar to Anzaldua (1999), I enjoy “picking out images from my soul’s eye, fishing for the right words to recreate the images. Words are blades of grass pushing past the obstacles...” (p. 93). For me, these obstacles involve the page itself.

Lived experiences of participants are central to producing a/r/tography by researchers wishing to create and recreate participants experiences (Irwin, 2004). My vision of an ethnographic framework entwines the writing process with the writing product (Richardson, 2000). It allows me the creativity I wish to utilize when engaging with others as I reimagine my research. By simply bringing disparate voices together in a research environment I created a fragmented world; by creating and honoring those voices through performance, I acknowledge this partiality by stitching them together as creatively as I possibly can while still maintaining integrity for those involved (Pinar, 2004).

***Ethnotheatre and ethnodrama: From page to stage***

As an a/r/tographer, my primary artistic interest lies in ethnotheatre, which is an applied theatre presentation powered by human stories. Ethnotheatre results in an ethnodrama, which is a written script which contains selections of narratives dramatized after the interview process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Popular examples of ethnodramas include the works of Anna Deavere Smith (1993, 1994, 2000); Ann Nelson's *The Guys* (2002) about policemen and firefighters during the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center; Moises Kaufmann's *The Laramie Project* (2001) about the killing of Matthew Shepard; Bennett et al's long-running Broadway musical *A Chorus Line* (1975); Michael Moore's 2002 *Bowling for Columbine* about the murders in a high school; Hongsheng's 2001 drama *Quitting*, about drug abuse; Steppenwolf Theatre's 2002 production of Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*; Eve Ensler's (2000) *The Vagina Monologues*; and PBS' *An American Family* (1973). "Ethnotheatre is just one of several forms available to present and represent" ethnographic work (Saldana, 2005a, p. 2). For examples of ethnotheatre in dissertations, see Joseph Fumari's *What's the Point? Adolescent adventures in the dramatic experience of the learning self in the making* (2007) from Teacher's College at Columbia University; Rebecca Jarvis' *Canaries in the classroom: Intimate terrorism survivors' stories* (2009) from Arizona State University; Brad Vincent's *The silence at school: Creating an ethnodrama for educators about the elementary, middle, and high school memories of gay boys* (2006) from New York University; Jillian Campana's *A participatory methodology for ethnographic arts-based research: Collaborative playwriting and performance as data collection, analysis, and presentation* (2005) from the University of Montana; Alison English's "Educating us into the virtues:" *A consideration of ethnodrama as a valid form of public moral argument in addressing domestic violence* (2005) from Regent University; and Henry Tabak's *The whole classroom as a stage: A playscript/analysis of a novice teacher using drama to*



*enhance learning* (2002) from the University of Chicago. In each of these pieces, the author engaged in ethnographic research and presents her or his work in an ethnodrama format, typically to highlight the disconnect between academic writing and the need to retain the power of the voice for a broader audience.

### ***How these create a journey***

Ethnographic frameworks have given shape to this work throughout, as I focus on the people and their words in this writing. However, performance ethnography, a/r/tography, ethnotheatre, and ethnodrama follow me on a longer work which spans beyond this writing. It is my intention to create a performance piece utilizing this data, and to fully embrace my own relationship to a/r/tography. I wish to recreate participant experiences for as wide an audience as possible, and through the medium of performing I intend to do so. Therefore, the culminating aspect of this longer journey is a performance for educators which is accessible, enjoyable, and information outside of the academy.

For this portion of my academic journey with this data, meaning the completion of my PhD requirements, I decided not to develop the performance piece. First, there is an art to getting a PhD completed, and after much reflection it became apparent it would be much simpler for me to complete my requirements with a more traditional approach. Second, due to the nature of this study, which included an online focus group format, using dramaturgical coding became quite a challenge. Dramaturgical coding involves using quite a bit of visual stimuli during the coding process, but the online format did not offer this. Attempting to utilize this type of coding became almost a theoretical impossibility since I had no visual contact with any participants. Finally, I also realized quickly during data analysis that, as a neophyte researcher, I needed to focus my efforts on quality analysis work, not the creation of the piece. As an academic exercise, working

with my data and writing this dissertation proved to be quite challenging, and the complexity of adding a creative dimension to this would not have served my purpose at this time, which was to graduate. I wanted to highlight these tensions within this work, for I did not delay the creation of an ethnodrama lightly.

### **A nod to phenomenology**

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of this study, much of the research presented also embraces phenomenology as an influence to this ethnographic framework. Phenomenology offers a “descriptive, reflective, interpretative and engaging mode of inquiry from which the essence of an experience may be elicited” (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 49). I acknowledge van Manen’s perspective (1990) that experience is considered to be an individual’s perceptions of her presence in the world at a moment when things are constituted. These perceptions of the lived experience, and these experiences as being specific to context, are assumptions of phenomenology and are a part of the grounding of this study as well. This desire to explore the essence of experience is critical to this study, as each participant came to the study encouraged to share the essence(s) of their experience(s). However, where the ethnographic framework becomes more salient is in the exploration of rural sex educators as a cultural group. Since I was looking more explicitly into the shared values of a loosely connected group of people, explicitly rural sex educators, the ethnographic framework was the more influential throughout the study.

So why did I include this nod to phenomenology? Because this work pushes the contemporary boundaries of ethnography since the rich visual data typically present in an ethnographic study was not present. I had no visuals at all, beyond my own computer screen and my imagination. Without this, I struggled with whether I was truly looking at an essence to an experience, but I realized I was not. I wanted to know what these sex educators believed

collectively, and look across rural sex education environments, to try and make meaning of these experiences. Frankly, it was less an essence in which I was interested and more of a culture.

What fascinated me was how these educators, who probably would not have interacted with one another due to their distances from one another, had common experiences in queering rural sex education. However, I feel an obligation to tip my hat to phenomenology since it did give me pause.

### **My experiences and how they inform my study**

Who I am as a researcher is of fundamental importance is critical to any qualitative study. While I have made it clear I will be using a performance ethnography framework, integrated with autoethnography and queer theory, it also is important to understand my background and involvement as the choreographer/director of this piece. I will now show elements of my own performance within this research and within my own life.

The personal truths I experience as a queer-identified artist/researcher/teacher are all intertwined, and may make my queer perspective different than other queer perspectives. My own queer identity clearly shaped the focus of my study. My truth is most honestly explored for me when I can merge my queer and academic identities. As a researcher, my own truths get explored routinely on the homo/heterosexual binary in everyday life; as an artist, my own performances within these binaries demand constant investigation; and as a teacher, I feel an obligation to help other queer-identified persons understand how they create their own spaces.

As a queer doctoral student, college administrator, faculty member, and family member, I am occasionally reminded that I am not a fully accepted part of the dominant culture, particularly when I leave the safety of my classrooms. I deal with marginalization on a regular basis. This also, at times, limits my own desire to achieve success, for sometimes I feel as if I have to fight

the “double battle” of educating others about inclusivity and respect while trying to manage my own challenges with not being wholly included. I’d like to share a few of these experiences to help you understand how these have impacted me.

As a queer, I have no familial training in how to deal with the realities of homophobia, as I did not have a queer role model to help. Families are the “chief agents of a deployment of sexuality which [draws] its outside support from doctors, educators, and psychiatrists” (Foucault, 1978, p. 110). My family always created a safe space for me to regenerate, think, and renew, but when my queer identity became known to them (it was known to me years earlier), suddenly this safety was withdrawn. I had to navigate events which were previously fun and relaxing, like holidays and vacations, and try to make a space for myself, which was now stressful and emotionally charged. I can recall several incidents in my own family where the lack of support was apparent. I remember my now-deceased grandmother refusing to acknowledge my partner as a female, and instead insisting she was male and calling her “son.” I have nieces on my partner’s side of the family with whom I am very close and who have no memories without me in them, who do not call me “Aunt Jen” even though they were, in fact, in our wedding and call all the heterosexual spouses of relatives “aunt” or “uncle.” I have had family members refer to my “choice” to be queer. Some of the greatest stressors have dissipated through time, and I have never been unwelcome in my family households, but there are still moments which remind me quite vividly that I am different. On the surface these may appear to be inconsequential, isolated examples, but I realized quickly I would never be totally accepted in the way I was when I dated men, while I was still struggling with my own sexuality. However, my own discomfort has not kept me from having relationships with others but instead has enabled me to examine how other queers make sense of their relationships. It has led to an intellectual curiosity, a need for intellectual safety, which has been met by queer theory. In the end, it is this safety in queer words, and my desire to perform my research, which has motivated me throughout this project.

However, I still wonder about the motivations of my family, and what stirs them to view me differently.

Outside of my family I have run quite often into homophobia and anti-queer sentiment. Throughout my doctoral studies I have been employed in the diversity field at three different college campuses, which means my work has often made me a target. Whether I want my queerness to be public or not, it is. My most recent example came from an on-campus which my office funded. The event included a dinner followed by a speaker. The speaker is rather well-known, and someone I know and enjoy personally, and I was hoping that, as a major funder to the event, I would be seated at his table for dinner. I had RSVPed for two, myself and my partner. However, when I arrived I realized that while I was at the speakers' table, I was not seated with my partner, although all other married funders who were seated at the table, all of whom were heterosexual, were seated with their spouses. I questioned the organizer, and she indicated that my partner could sit at a table with students (she is not a student). Since the tables were preset, there was no room to pull up another chair, so I asked for my partner and I to be reseated together at another table. The organizer, who knows very well I am married to my partner, did not understand why I would not take the seat of honor with the speaker. When I indicated it was because I did not like the message it sent when all the heterosexual couples were seated together but the queer couple was not, she got quite upset with me for the "implication" that she was homophobic. I quietly moved myself and partner to a back table and enjoyed the event from afar, but I was quite shaken. The organizer's decision to split us, I believe, was a reflection of the level of seriousness with which she took queer relationships in comparison to heterosexual relationships, and her own reaction when I labeled this as heterosexist leads me to believe hers was an unconscious decision. Since I was shocked by the confrontation, I then spent the rest of the event distracted and disturbed.

However, when I am performing I have the ability to distract myself from the homophobia I encounter regularly. I have trained as a classical singer, but have really found my stride as a musical theatre performer, and when I am singing, whether it is onstage in a role or in my living room seated at my square grand piano, these incidents are far from me. Once there is music in my ear, I become aware of my sound, I become aware of my body, and I focus on beauty. While I coax and urge my voice to obey and also be free, I transcend the struggles of my world, and I enjoy the resiliency of my sound. I transport myself to the emotion of the piece on which I am working, and I transform myself into the person singing those words. The disgusted looks of neighbors are no longer relevant, nor is the revoked invitation to a local church event when someone learns my partner is female: they are irrelevant. One may say my music is my own vacation, my own escape, from being a rural queer.

This space is more than just a way to relax, however, as it is also a place where I feel I exist most saliently as a queer. I embrace a/r/tography, ethnodrama, and queerness in this realm. As an a/r/tographer, I strive to create beauty with my body; as a researcher, I use my own training in music as an undergraduate to investigate my body and voice; as an educator, I want others to understand what I am feeling, and through performance I turn my selfish act of escapism into a potential site for understanding. My a/r/tography leads me to ethnotheatre, as I shape the pieces and choose the sounds which surround me in this performance. The journey is always overlaid with a queering; however, as I transport and transform myself into the pieces I perform and record. My journey through my performances is highly queered, and shaped by the people and words and sounds I have encountered before the performance, some which have helped me and others which have hurt me, all of which enabled me to become the queer I am today. This ability to release the struggles I encounter when confronted with my queer identity unexpectedly (or sometimes knowingly) gives me strength to move beyond, and to give back. I have the advantage of struggling with these issues as an adult, and I cannot imagine how I would have handled these

pressures as an adolescent. As an a/r/tographer I feel I am required to help create those spaces. I view my queer identity as a responsibility to honor those spaces where the powerless lose their voice. In turn, I hope my example helps others create spaces for those behind me.

I continue to work through the impact of my own identity and integration with the arts, while simultaneously looking to understand how others make spaces for queer identities. I have a pressing desire to understand so I can truly create spaces which are inclusive, and lead others to do so.

As mentioned previously, there are three main premises shaping my work – a/r/tography, performance ethnography, and queer theory. I wanted my process to help me reveal my own experiences along with those participating in the study itself. According to Irwin (2004) “a/r/tography is about each of us living a life of deep meaning enhanced through perceptual practices that reveal what was once hidden, create what has never been known, and imagine what we hope to achieve” (p. 36). According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), the artographic gaze looks:

First through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exploring a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move though, refract, and resist cultural interpretations....As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition. (p.739-740)

As a result of these shifts, a/r/tography opens new spaces through the combination of qualitative techniques, resulting in a performance, and well-suited for a queer perspective.

As a researcher, I tried at all times to be aware of how my queer positionality shaped the process of making meaning. The participants in the study were not aware of my queer identity as I did not disclose it; however, they were aware of my role as a doctoral student as I introduced myself as such. I attempted to let the participants speak openly and frankly about their experiences by adding questions to enhance their postings and further reveal the participants’ perceived truths. There was an inherent desire in the participants who opted into my study to be inclusive to queer students, since a participant who was not interested would not have responded

to my solicitation. The only correspondence I had with the participants was electronically and in writing, which may have made the communication process more challenging for some. I found, as a performance ethnographer, not having visual communications to be extremely difficult. Nuances in verbalized language were not always as apparent in written, electronic form.

This chapter revealed how this study used ethnography that is informed by a/r/tography. The connections between these qualitative forms of investigation are critical to my own desires as a researcher, which includes the desire for a comprehensive portrayal of the experiences of rural sex educators along with myself as a researcher. This approach allows me to set forth a rich description of the participants' cultural experiences and also details the frequently overlooked viewpoint of the researcher. In the next chapter I explore issues related to research recruitment and design.



## **Chapter 4**

### **RESEARCH RECRUITMENT AND DESIGN**

In this chapter I review the criteria for participation in the study, including the required characteristics of all participants. I also review the data collection methodology and the data analysis process. Finally, I address my place in this research.

#### **Participant selection**

Due to the unique circumstances surrounding the definition of sex educators alone, it was quite challenging to determine the most appropriate candidates for this research study. Therefore, I used two main categories when searching for appropriate participants – participant characteristics and school geography.

This research focuses on the unique perspectives of those who participated, and therefore depends upon a purposeful selection of a small number of participants. Due to the challenges of finding candidates in rural areas, as well as the difficulty in knowing who is teaching sex education in a district, snowball sampling is employed to gather the most appropriate sample. Snowball sampling aids researchers in locating critical cases within set criteria (Patton, 2002). Snowball sampling is

used when the desired sample characteristic is rare. It may be extremely difficult or cost prohibitive to locate respondents in these situations. Snowball sampling relies on referrals from initial subjects to generate additional subjects (StatPac, 2009, p. 1).

My recruitment took a three-tiered approach. First, I developed a generic recruitment email, which I then sent out to thirty unique contacts, beginning with people I knew who were professionally interested in sex education. These contact eventually led me to a variety of professional organizations and listservs connected with sex education, individual teachers who

may be of help, and school administrators. This in itself was quite a diverse group, as sex educators can be found throughout many areas of education. Some of the organizations which assisted with recruitment include the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educators' Network (GLSEN); the American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT); the Sexuality Information Clearinghouse of the United States (SIECUS); Planned Parenthood; the American Educational Research Association (AERA); the National Association of Health Education Centers; the Safe Schools Coalition; The Pennsylvania Association of Liaisons and Officers of Multicultural Affairs (PALOMA); American Society for Curriculum Development; the American School Health Association; and Advocates for Youth.

Even with such a variety of organizations, recruitment was extremely difficult. I used a generic recruitment email to gather interested participants (see Appendix C), and once I received a response I then sent a second email directly to the individual asking eligibility questions and letting respondents know they are in no way obligated to participate (see Appendix D). However, throughout the recruitment I faced challenges I did not anticipate. Overall, I would have been well-served to have included "protections" information in my initial recruitment email (although my recruitment emails were all approved in advanced by the Office of Research Protections at the Pennsylvania State University), since most issues that emerged focused on participant safety and confidentiality.

Although I felt the nature of Recruitment Email #1 (see Appendix C) to be non-threatening to those interested, some disagreed. After sending my recruitment email to a queer listserv, one member felt compelled to write the following response:

Our community is not well served by someone who does not seem to know the basics of informed consent or how to describe a research study to potential respondents. And to make this request of teachers is more problematic. How are we to know that this person, who does not even tell us her major, degree program, etc., is not going to share the list of respondents with others? She might not know that in most of Pennsylvania, there is no employment protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation. Do not participate in this research until the researcher provides the required and ethically

important information to us. I would like to know who her adviser is so that I can send that person an email about my concerns, but we are not given that information.

Fortunately, my advisor and I were able to address these issues with the individual, and he then offered his support via the listserv once he had more information. Although this quasi-personal attack from a tenured faculty member whom I knew at my own institution was disconcerting, this was not the end to my recruitment challenges. I did receive many responses to my request for participants but then realized that even my solicitation was a bit unclear. Respondents were unclear if they were, in fact, a rural sex educator, and many asked me if they “counted.” Others wondered what inclusion meant. Many stated they would love to help but did not teach any LGBT-related topics. Others stated clearly and precisely that they do not deal with these issues, and did not think it was appropriate for public schools to do so. One told an interesting story via email that she could not teach LGBT issues if she wanted to, because she could not even teach evolution:

I had to change my lesson descriptions on "pre-historic art" to "cave art" since the world began 6000 years ago when God put Adam and Eve in the garden.

Clearly, many were deeply concerned about confidentiality, some to the point where they would not even feel comfortable sharing the recruitment email. In short, it appears that I lost many potential participants because of fears that the school district or teacher's identity would be revealed, because the administration forbade participation, and because teachers did not feel comfortable with the confidentiality parameters of the study.

Nonetheless, I was able to gather a list of nine participants who were comfortable in the study, met study criteria, and were able to devote time to participating in an online focus group. I was pleased with this result, as the number of desired participants was between eight and fourteen (more on this below). Fortunately, I also was able to recruit a geographically diverse group of participants, with representation from Hawaii, Iowa, New York, Oregon, and Washington.

In relation to confidentiality, all potential participants responded to the initial recruitment email directly to me. I then sent a more detailed recruitment email to the potential participant explaining the criteria for the study. I did not ask the participants for their actual name, although I did ask for the name and address of the school(s) where the participant taught. The school information was only needed to confirm that the district is in fact considered rural under NCES standards. No other identifying information was collected from the participant. I did retain this information to ensure geographic disbursement of participants. Once final selections were made, each participant received a detailed set of instructions for logging into the study site, including the pseudonym for each participant (See Appendix E). Only the pseudonym appeared on the study site, and there was no way for participants to know one another's true identity unless the participant herself opted to share that information.

### **Participant Characteristics**

Since the focus of this research is the perspective of sex educators who are queering sex education in rural public schools, it was important for me to put some strict contextual boundaries around the participants themselves. Individuals selected all met the following criteria:

1. each individual worked in a public school teaching sex education in some form in the last five years;
2. she or he attempted to queer the sex education curriculum by being inclusive to sexual minorities in some way (whether successfully or not);
3. she or he had – or attempted to have - a minimum of fifteen hours of sex education specific instructional time per year for a minimum of one year; and
4. the school in which she or he taught is classified as a rural school district by NCES.

These selection criteria helped address several critical issues with this study. First, it is important that this work occurred in a public school setting, since these are the schools most effected by the federal abstinence guidelines. Second, a minimum number of contact hours was established so teachers who taught a brief course segment on sex education (e.g. a biology teacher who offers a one-hour lecture on biological functioning in a science classroom) were not qualified. However, teachers who attempt to teach a longer sex education course but were denied the right to do so may still be eligible to participate in this study. The third qualification is that they have queered sex education in some way. This terminology may or may not be employed by the educators; however, what will make them appropriate to the study is that they attempted to disrupt the dominant cultural understanding of the naturalness of heterosexuality and conventional gender relations.

However, some challenges emerged from these definitions. For example, one participant taught at a public university, which is in fact a “public school,” and taught courses which had a focus on queer sexuality. Others worked for organizations which were contracted by numerous public schools but were not actually employed by these schools; yet these contact hours were enough to ensure acceptance into the study. Some taught in an urban context, or had offices in an urban context, but served rural areas primarily. Those educators who were employed by the public schools taught subjects ranging from health education to biology to English. As one can imagine, with a sample size of only nine and such disparities in job functions, I can only imagine how challenging it would be to do this study on a larger scale.

### **Geographic Considerations for Selection**

As mentioned previously, to be eligible, educators must have attempted to queer sex education within the context of rural public schools. For the purposes of this study, I will be

utilizing the NCES categorization of rural schools, which include fringe, distant, or remote (Provasnik et al, 2007). A rural fringe area is that which is “less than or equal to five miles from an urbanized area [population of greater than 50,000] as well as less than 2.5 miles from an urban cluster [populations between 25,000 and 50,000]” (Provasnik et al, 2007, p. 2). To give a sense of schools in the United States, there are 14,166 public school districts across all states, 1,690 rural fringe (twelve percent), 3,130 rural distant (22%), and 3,218 rural remote (23%), meaning 57% of all schools are rural-classified (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). One educator in this study served a primarily rural fringe district. A rural distant area is five to 25 miles from an urbanized area and 2.5 to ten miles from an urban cluster (Provasnik et al, 2007). Five participants worked in these types of schools. A rural remote area is “more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than ten miles from an urban cluster” (Provasnik et al, 2007, p. 2). Three participants worked in this type of school. Finally, one educator worked primarily in a suburban-classified school which served a primarily rural population, and one educator worked in an urban-environment that served a large rural population as well.

Since qualitative research focuses on studying a particular subject in depth, sample sizes are typically small. This study was no exception, with ten total participants. The design for this research was approved by the Pennsylvania State University’s Office of Research Protections. Several documents were approved by the Office of Research Protections, including an informed consent document which can be found in Appendix B. Each participant received an electronic copy of this document along with the final recruitment email (see Appendix E), and was asked to read the document. Response to the eligibility survey implied consent to participate. Participants were then asked to keep a copy of the informed consent document for their records.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Qualitative researchers must determine a strategy for data collection. Typically, qualitative researchers use a combination of observation, interview, and document analysis, requiring researchers to have skills in anthropology, sociology, and history. Qualitative research also requires inspiration, to help move the research from an idea to a method of data collection. This collection method must be dependable throughout the duration of the study. As the choreographer of this study, my data collection methods are the costumes, lighting, and sets which uphold my research.

Qualitative research typically consists of numerous strategies for obtaining data, including observational data, like field notes; interview data, such as transcriptions; and a diary of the researcher (Richards and Morse, 2007). Since this study utilizes an ethnographic framework, the primary means of data collection was in-depth interviews in an online focus group format. In addition, I utilized my own observational notes during the online focus group in order to record my own reflections throughout the process.

#### **Semi-Structured Interviews in a Online Focus Group**

The primary means of data collection was semi-structured questioning which occurred in an online focus group format. Semi-structured questioning was appropriate because they allowed me to attempt to understand the complex behaviors of sex educators without imposing any advanced categorization which may limit results (Fontana and Frey, 2000). Semi-structured interviews do in fact have some structure, including a context and interest in a topic that is reflected in an interview guide. The primary difference between semi-structured and structured interviews, however, lies in the mode of questioning. A semi-structured approach does not imply

a lack of structure but rather an open-ended approach to questioning. In addition, this open method of questioning allowed me, as a researcher, to acknowledge and remain fully present in the process of interviewing (Fine, Weis, Wesen, & Wong, 2000). I constructed a questioning protocol that allowed for maximum flexibility within the process, including some standard questions (Carspecken, 1996). The questions utilized can be found in Appendix B. The interview guide ensured that there were basic questions asked during the study.

### **Focus groups**

Focus groups possess elements of both participant observations and interviews yet remain distinct as a research method (Morgan, 1988). One of the most important reasons why I was interested in working with focus groups is that it allowed me to observe collective human interaction. In addition, focus groups enable researchers to “gather large amounts of information about such interactions in limited periods of time” (Madriz, 2000, p. 836). However, focus groups do not have the favored status in the social sciences that the individual interview has. Madriz (2000) believes this to be due to the dominance of positivistic quantitative studies that privilege individual questionnaires in research as well as the much simpler task of gathering one participant at a time for interviews, versus the scheduling challenges sometimes faced in focus group work. Therefore, the information regarding focus groups is “not only scarce by unsystematic” (Madriz, 2000, p. 836).

One disadvantage of focus groups, particularly this online focus group, is they take place outside of the settings where the social interaction being studied normally occurs (in this case the school environment). Therefore, the behavioral data gathered through focus groups is narrower than that which occurs in “natural” settings. In a traditional focus group, typically verbal communication, body language, and any other means of self-reported data are the only data which



is gathered. However, in an online focus group, this is limited to written communication only, and this is limited by the extent to which the participant feels comfortable with the written word and technology as well as the differences between synchronous and asynchronous communication. In addition, in any focus group, it is a challenge to gauge the authenticity of the social interactions, since typically a facilitator is present to guide and steer the group. There are arguments that state that the presence of this facilitator alters the behavior of the participants (Madriz, 2000).

However, the advantages of focus groups are great, particularly when the richness of observing the interactive process between participants is valued in the research. Focus groups allow for spontaneity between participants which sometimes helps hesitant or timid participants feel more comfortable. In addition, the interaction between the participants often decreases the amount of interaction required by the facilitator, and certainly more so than in a one-on-one interview. This helps to reduce researcher bias, to a certain extent, and places more emphasis on the participants' viewpoints (Madriz, 2000).

As a feminist researcher, it was critical to me that I address the moral dilemmas present during the interview process as well as my role as the interviewer in this process. In particular, I was concerned about protecting the participants, some of whom faced challenges in participating, whether they be personal or professional, and ensuring their feelings were validated and their voices heard throughout the study (Fontana & Frey, 2000). In addition, feminist researchers have acknowledged the absence of certain groups, including queers and those who support queers, in much research, and this research attempts to bring queer issues to the forefront of the research (Madriz, 2000, p. 836).

### **How the focus groups were conducted**

An asynchronous electronic focus group format was used, meaning “participants...read others’ comments and contribute[d] a comment themselves at any time, [and] not necessarily when anyone else is participating” (Rezabek, 2000, p. 3). The advantages of using such methods, particularly with a rural participant population, include lower costs, potential to reach a broader geographic scope, access to participants who may normally have time or location constraints (since participants can access the online site at any time convenient to them), and a comfortable way to participate (Edmunds, 1999). In addition, Edmunds highlights the speediness of an online process (versus face-to-face) as well as the openness often created by an anonymous environment (Edmunds, 1999). The traditional face-to-face focus group typically varies from seven to twelve participants (Marshall and Rossman, 1995).

To determine the appropriate number of participants that was methodologically sound for focus groups (Stewart & Williams, 2005; Kenny, 2005; Campbel et al, 2001; Sweet, 2001; Rezabek, 2000; Gaiser, 1997), I looked for standards for online focus groups, and I found very little. Therefore, I utilized standards for face-to-face focus groups. In a typical face-to-face focus group, there are between seven and twelve participants, all of whom participate for sixty minutes. In addition, four to six focus groups total are the minimum acceptable standard to ensure consistency in the themes which emerge. Therefore, in typical face-to-face focus groups, investigators have between 28 and 48 participants between all groups who each participate for approximately sixty minutes. Accordingly, between all participants, the investigators have between 28 hours of data at a minimum and 48 hours maximum (Greenbaum, 2009; Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007; Stewart & Williams, 2005).

For this study, participants were active in an asynchronous online focus group for fourteen days. Each participant was expected to check on the site every day during this period,

read posted comments and questions, and respond when appropriate. Each participant, on average, engaged with the site for a minimum of fifteen minutes a day for the two week study period, totaling 3.5 contact hours per participant. Therefore, to meet the standards set by traditional focus groups, a minimum of eight participants (28 contact hours) and a maximum of fourteen participants (49 contact hours) were needed for this study. With nine participants, those standards were met.

The semi-structured, open-ended questions, allowed for myself as the interviewer and the participant as the interviewee to actively negotiate the research process, allowing for the situations presented by the participant to remain contextualized and for the participants to help shape the conversations and questions which emerged (Fontana and Frey, 2000). New interview questions were presented to participants either when discussion of a previous question came to a natural conclusion or every three days, whichever occurred first. This ensured all five planned questions were asked, in addition to numerous questions which emerged during the focus group process. The discussions of the participants were captured via an online message board hosting tool, which then facilitated in transcription. Therefore, in the end, the final version of this research is a composite of the interactions on the online site between myself and the participants as well as amongst the participants themselves. For further clarification, see the table below for detailed information on each question.

Table 1 - Question data

Question Number	Date Opened	Date Concluded	Number of Days Opened	Number of Participants
1	4/1/2010	4/9/2010	9	8
1A	4/2/2010	4/9/2010	8	5
1B	4/2/2010	4/8/2010	7	5
2	4/4/2010	4/7/2010	4	4
3	4/6/2010	4/9/2010	4	7
3A	4/7/2010	4/17/2010	11	6
4	4/9/2010	4/15/2010	7	6
4A	4/9/2010	4/12/2010	4	5
5	4/13/2010	4/14/2010	2	5
5A	4/14/2010	4/17/2010	4	3

In Table 1, the Question Number column indicates the unique identifier given to each open-ended question that led off a discussion. Questions which appear as simply numbers are those which are a planned part of the semi-structured interviews; those with numbers and letters are those that were offshoot questions that developed out of the question that shares the same number. For example, questions 1A and 1B both developed out of conversations which emerged from question 1. The Date Opened column indicates the date the question was first posted, and the Date Concluded column indicates when the discussion of the question posed reached a natural conclusion and no further postings occurred. The Number of Days Opened column indicates the total number of days between Date Opened and Date Concluded. Finally, the Number of Participants Column indicates the total number of participants who participated in the conversation surrounding that question.

As can be seen, the average length of time for a discussion was 6.7 days, or almost a week. The longest discussion ran for eleven days, and the shortest for two days. On average, 5.4 participants were involved in any discussion. Interestingly, two of the longest discussions involved questions which emerged from another question, with one emergent question (3A) provoking conversation lasting eleven days. Typically, questions which involved the greatest number of respondents were those that were part of the base questions.

Throughout the process, I member checked my knowledge after participants discussed the questions by summarizing what I understood. To develop a truly rich data set, I frequently asked participants to elaborate points at times with personal stories and life experiences highlighting their points. All questions in Table 1 which have a letter in the Question Number column (questions 1A, 1B, 3A, 4A, and 5A) were questions which asked for further elaboration and clarification. This added to the richness of the data. Examples of these types of questions include “Can you give me examples of how you use this humor?,” “Can you share some examples of when sexual minority issues have come up?,” and “Would anyone be willing to share some stories about LGBTQ students in your classes?” All of these were my attempt to get participants to share stories along with their beliefs, and to have participants also hear and respond to one another’s stories. In relation to participation, Table 2 shows a breakdown of the number of responses by participant, along with a word count to help illustrate which participants contributed most frequently

**Table 2 - Responses by participants**

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Total Number of Responses</b>	<b>Total Word Count</b>
Alison	8	1,752
Anne	16	2,575
Carol	6	862
Christi	6	1,425
Delta	20	2,110
Elin	5	1,129
Harry	7	870
Manny	41	9,918
Tina	15	4,408
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>25,049</b>

At the end of the study, I transcribed all discussions by cutting and pasting text from the website during all days of the study. I then inserted this into a Word table that included columns for participant identifiers along with the actual text of the participant. I included myself in this as

well, since I interacted with the participants throughout. I also labeled all data with a sequence number, which was based on the actual time the discussion occurred. I then included columns for theme codes, as themes emerged during the coding process (for further discussion of this process, see Data Analysis, below). Finally, once a transcript of the entire fourteen days was complete, I provided the opportunity for all participants to review the transcript as well as the introductions you see in Chapter Five for verification via email (see Appendix F). The majority of participants offered additional feedback and clarification in the process. Some of the participants did offer me edits, particularly regarding changing their wording, and some indicated they had no changes. One educator was surprised to see the word queer utilized (she had not noticed it before) and also gave me rather extensive clarification on her role as an educator, which she felt I had misrepresented. We then got into a side conversation regarding queer theory, with which she was not familiar, and I sent her some resources to learn more, and she was then curious if others knew about the term queer or had asked about it. Another participant also clarified what she was able to teach in the various school districts in which she worked, as she felt I had not fully represented the range of what she was able to teach. One participant was concerned that it appeared she said more than others, and wanted to confirm that she was not too “talkative” throughout, which I assured her she was not. Numerous participants also just offered words of support for me throughout the project.

### **Issues and opportunities of electronic focus groups**

Electronic focus groups allow access to research participants that may find one-on-one and/or face-to-face interactions scary or intimidating. In addition, with an electronic focus group, ideas are shared in an environment by participants without the visual markers of class, ethnicity, and gender (to name a few) which may make participants uncomfortable. There is research to

support the idea that participants find focus groups more gratifying than an individual interview (Morgan, 1988). This certainly holds true in face-to-face focus groups, but since this focus group was held electronically I feel it is important to acknowledge the uniqueness of this scenario.

It is critical to recognize the uniqueness of collecting online data, and I take this time to acknowledge the advantages and disadvantages of online data. The strength of online data include a global reach, with over 1.1 billion internet users, with highest saturation in industrialized countries (ClickZ, 2005); flexibility, with multiple choices to format and structure based on user and facilitator preferences; speed, for the time-efficient manner in which online groups can be conducted; technological innovations, which allow for control, security, and safety for participants; convenience, since participants are able to respond at their leisure; ease of data entry and analysis, since data is often already in a written format and easy to cut and paste into analysis tools, thus reducing human error in data input; low administrative costs, particularly when compared to running face-to-face focus groups for participants who are around the country; ease of follow-up, since all communication occurred via email; and ease in participant recruitment, since electronic communication makes reaching larger audience simpler (Evans & Manthur, 2005). Disadvantages include the perception of a focus group as “less serious” since it occurs online, since the increase in electronic communications makes it difficult for many potential participants to distinguish between legitimate requests and junk mail or spam; the skewed attributes of the internet population, who are not representative of all rural sex educators in the United States; questions about sample selection and implementation, particularly since there is no way to know if a participant is truly who she says she is; participant lack of technical expertise, for although most participants have internet experience they may not have online focus group experience; technological variations, as the effectiveness of online focus groups are affected by the type of internet connection and the configuration of the participant’s computer,

particularly if the internet access is dial-up (websiteoptimization.com, 2004); unclear instructions, because participants will be interpreting focus group instructions on their own; impersonality, as related to the lack of true human interaction beyond those which occur electronically; privacy and security, including the security of transmitted data and how the data will be utilized (Berry, 2004); low participation rates, for even with a commitment to the study it is challenging to engage a disengaged participant due to the lack of communication beyond the electronic (Evans & Manthur, 2005).

My decision to utilize an electronic focus group format, with participants logging in and writing on topics over a two week period, greatly facilitated the process of gathering the widest range of participants from the largest geographic area. I engaged in an asynchronous focus groups process, meaning participants logged in during a prescribed range of dates at times convenient to them. The challenge remained in the lack of face-to-face interaction as well as the inability to read nonverbal cues. Also, I was not aware of the gender, race, age, class, or other characteristics of the participants unless they chose to disclose that information at some point during the focus group process. Establishing a relationship with the participants proved to be a bit more challenging due to this, and the best I could do to ensure this was to acknowledge all participant comments. Of course, there is also the challenge that I could not verify that my participants were actually employed in the public school settings they indicated, since I did not have access to this information for confidentiality reasons. Conversely, there was no way for the participants to trust that I am truly who I say I am, except that I worked hard through the process to establish electronic rapport. One of my gravest concerns was to protect the anonymity of the participants, and I created pseudonyms for all participants. Some participants opted to reveal their true identities, becoming frustrated with the pseudonyms, but most did not (see Appendix E for the email explaining the pseudonyms which went to each participant individually).



To be quite honest, there is scant literature in the social sciences on conducting an online focus group, although there is research available in the fields of marketing and some in health care as well, which has been employing online focus groups for years (Stewart & Williams, 2005; Kenny, 2005; Campbel et al, 2001; Sweet, 2001; Rezabek, 2000; Gaiser, 1997). The development of online environments as discrete cultural contexts has generated a degree of both anxiety and innovation regarding the application of methods that were previously reserved for offline settings (Hine, 2000). Most research has involved attempting to apply traditional field methods, such as participant observation, interviews, focus groups, and surveys with varying degrees of success (Gaston & Zweerink, 2004; Baym, 1995; Correll, 1995). With each new attempt to mediate technology with traditional methods of investigation, new forms of these methods were evolving, and this also holds true for online focus groups (Stewart & Williams, 2005). Issues which have emerged ranged from the practical – moderation and analysis – to the unique – technological ethics and the use of 3D or camera technologies. These issues all come together to provide insights into the viability and practicality of online focus groups. One issue which emerged frequently was whether or not online focus groups are, in fact, truly focus groups. It is important to note here that observations of naturally occurring online group discussions are not online focus groups, just as covert observations of naturally occurring conversations in “real life” is not considered a focus group (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). A traditional focus group is characterized by an organized group discussion focusing on a certain topic, which is monitored, guided, and recorded by a researcher (Steward & Williams, 2005), with a distinguishing feature being the explicit use of group interaction for data production. In most contexts, comfortable and nonthreatening environments are seen as necessary to facilitate open discussion (Morgan, 1998; Kitzinger, 1994). Interestingly, much conversation focused on the acceptability of telephone interviews as “real” interviews, and telephone surveys as “real”

surveys, and so many researchers feel online focus groups are just an extension of traditional methods using technology, similar to the impact the telephone (Stewart & Williams, 2005).

Adapting research methods to utilize new technologies was generally seen as allowing for more diverse populations to participate in research. Asynchronous communications allow participants to construct in-depth narratives which may not be possible in uttered data. Yet along with these conversations emerged discussion of the cumbersome nature of online focus groups for the researcher. Examples of the cumbersome nature included ethical challenges, including the challenges with obtaining informed consent; identification and recruitment, with many internet users initially agreeing to participate but then withdrawing prior to the study beginning, often due to the transient nature of internet conversations; temporal and spatial flexibility, with scheduling challenges for the often international internet community; the lack of information on data analysis, interpretation, and representation for online focus groups can lead to questions about the claims of online focus groups; and finally, the rapidity with which technologies are changing require adaptive and responsive online methodologies (Stewart & Williams, 2005).

Yet the focus group did allow for participant interaction, and some vivid stories were shared, which were then easily able to be clarified via pointed questioning by myself and participants. The challenge for me lay in the development of the rich descriptions which make qualitative research so interesting, as much of my personal journaling throughout dealt more with the challenges of the medium than the participants themselves. However, I do believe that the online focus group will be utilized more frequently in the future, as technology develops and enables enhanced communication, and I look forward to having more guidance (or providing it) as researchers become more experienced with this medium.

## **Personal Writings and Observations**

Another source of data is my personal writings and observations. Personal writing both helps me remain focused on my own role as a researcher as well as to add my reflections and emotions, which are critical for the development of a performance piece. Examples of personal writings utilized in an ethnographic framework may include field notes, journaling, poetry, and visual art. These personal writings and observations occurred throughout the focus group process. By incorporating my writing into the process, I acknowledge my role in the research and “maintain a sense of moving in and out of the experience” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 87). In addition, this acknowledgement of my own feelings and reflections throughout the process enables an incorporation of the rich dimensions of research. It also allows me to be fully present in the process without doing so in a hegemonic manner (Janesick, 2000). Since the end result of this research is ethnodrama, my feelings and motives are critical to the development of a fully realized performance piece.

Throughout the focus group I engaged in daily personal writings and observations of the process. These notes took a side-by-side form, with the right side reflecting “existential, outward events” and the left side reflecting “inner responses” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 86). I found the right side notes, the “outward events,” very challenging, as I did not have any visual observational data as I would in a typical focus group, but rather I had only a computer screen. In addition, at times participants would write to me directly with something inconsequential to the research, like an apology for being absent for a day, and these secondary exchanges are all recorded in this document on the right side. However, having the personal writings and musings, helped me to remember what I was feeling and experiencing on that particular day, and helped me to make connections to events even after months have passed. For example, Figure 1 is an excerpt from my journal of April 15, 2010. Please note that sometimes my writings were

handwritten, and so this is a translation onto the printed page. Each day I represented my experience by writing on the right side “what” happened, a chronology of events, and on the left side my own musings, including every day a section called “Music for Today” which includes a song that I associate with the feeling of that day and either “Writing for Today” or “Lyrics for Today.” If I utilized “Writing for Today” I incorporated some of my own writings based on how I was feeling that day, and if I utilized “Lyrics for Today” that is because the creative writing did not happen that day and instead I included a lyric from the “Music for Today” which helps me evoke a feeling for that day. This not only helps me to evoke a sense memory for the day, but also will be very helpful in the creation of ethnotheatre.

### **Peer Group Review**

As I moved through the research process, I continually kept multiple audit streams open to review processes and products to ensure consistency. I not only had my advisor involved in the online focus group to offer feedback as needed, but I also had a weekly peer debriefing with colleagues who are familiar with the field and my work to test ideas, help me determine next steps, and review writings. Each week, I submitted materials to them as a group in an electronic format, and they then responded with thoughts and ideas to me independently. I also met with them as regularly to discuss progress. Some weeks all three colleagues were present at the meeting, whereas other weeks it was just myself and one person. We began meeting in November 2009, and the only weeks we did not meet were weeks where I had not written anything new or when schedules made this complicated for the participants. To date,

Thursday, April 15, 2010	
<p><i>I made it, and I really can't express how thankful I am for these strangers who participated in my study, for basically no reward! I'm excited to visit this data and show them what they shared with me.</i></p> <p><i>I heard from a participant who wants me to keep the study open for a few days, so I'm going to do that. She's been very active, so I'm eager to hear her concluding thoughts when she gets back in town. She's on vacation. Can I have one of those now? No rest for me until this is done. I'm tired. But eager.</i></p> <p><i>What motivates people to participate? Did I do enough to keep them engaged? Would I have enjoyed this experience? I really don't know. It was confusing to follow conversations on the website, which made it really hard. I wish I knew how to make that easier. I couldn't figure out a way to hide threads of conversations easily, and sometimes participants picked up threads from one conversation and carried them over to a new thread. I have a feeling this might be a coding nightmare.</i></p> <p><i>I made it.</i></p> <p><u>Music for Today</u> Eddi Reader – Bell Book and Candle</p> <p><u>Writing for Today</u> Let's be honest. How can we expect equal contribution? Let's focus on really building on our strengths, which requires adapting to change, letting people in, and being willing to hear someone speak. I don't think a day goes by in this community when I'm not reminded that I'm gay no matter how minor the slapdown is but I use my skills to figure out how the hell to get away with it because I am fortunate enough to hide myself in ways others are not. I use my creativity and face the challenges but still you all find a way to make me feel like shit. We need to ask ourselves some uncomfortable questions and then deal with the consequences of the difficulties we uncover so we can move on. Until then, let's sing our anthem... I pledge allegiance if you're not a fag to the right citizens of the United States of America.</p> <p><i>And to the republic on which we stand one nation underprivileged underrepresented understaffed with liberty and justice for some. Yours Truly. Me</i></p>	<p>I offered my deepest thanks for participation, and sent a note with the ongoing discussion between Carol and Delta about politics in the classroom.</p> <p>Manny posted his own question about perceptions of rural life, and Elin commented on resources are not often well-advertised.</p> <p>I explained that everyone will have the opportunity to offer feedback on the transcript.</p> <p>Alison indicated she had a few other things to say but did not have internet access and wanted to add a few things next week.</p> <p>Mary apologized because she did not think she participated enough, although she felt it was fun when she did.</p> <p>She also pointed me towards some documents that offered guidance in sex education in her home state.</p>

Figure 1 - Journal 4/15/10

we have communicated electronically 64 times and face-to-face eighteen times. This process continued from the beginning of the Institutional Review Board process to the defense of this dissertation.

### **Data Analysis**

Richards and Morse (2007) offer steps for managing the overwhelming amount of data produced from an ethnographic focus group. First, the researcher must begin by looking for structure, which was provided by me to a certain extent since I had some pre-defined questions. The structure of these pre-defined questions all focused on answering the larger question of “How do rural sex educators create environments that are inclusive to queer students?” From this framing question, I used the subquestions which can be found in the Interview Guide (Appendix B).

The data were originally put into Microsoft Excel, thinking this would be the easiest place to sort and code data. However, since the data were being cut and pasted from the study website, the formatting became an enormous challenge. Instead of pasting data in a cell as scrolling text, Excel formatted the web text into a line-by-line format. Therefore, everywhere on a web page where there was a line break due to web page formatting challenges, Excel put data on a new line. This became unmanageable as I attempted to combine Excel cells, ranging from cells being too large to see on one screen to mistakenly combining data from multiple utterances in one cell, and then having to resplit them. Figure 2 is an example of the data after I had struggled with it for a while (and the font size is actual, which was the only way I could get the data to fit on the screen).

	At the beginning of each of my sexual health programs, whether it be contraceptives or infections etc I make the broad statement that the information is important for everyone to know regardless of who they are with or attracted to, in the contraceptives program I list reasons why all types of women may want to use birth control even if they are not even having sex with the opposite sex. The benefits of the pill/patch/ring etc have with control of their menstrual flow and other pms symptoms aren't just for women who are attracted to men. I also ask the men why they need to know how these methods work, even if they will never partner with a woman, or will not for a long time. They usually come up with some good answers, as well as some pretty sexist ones as well. During my program on Abstinence I start with the question "what is sex?" who has a good definition? This is very difficult for them at first as they are usually looking at me like I'm some sort of alien who SHOULD know. One or two usually raise their hands and say "it's whether you're female or male" or "intercourse". To which I ask "what's intercourse?" this gets even more faces red but then one shouts out more times than not "penis in vagina!" I ask if that's it? That's the only definition? Pretty boring stuff then for everyone to be talking about if it's just ONE definition! I ask "what if there's no penis in the relationship?" what if there's no vagina?" sometimes it's blank stares, other times they understand what I'm getting at that everyone has the right to have consensual sex and it's not just a male/female thing. We then go over a big list of cards that have many different sexual acts on them from hugging, to touching over clothes, to vaginal/oral/anal sex. They come up with on their own what they think being abstinent is and what is not following abstinence. Sometimes I get a student or two (mostly males) who say "that's gross" or "duh, that's so gay" to which usually sets me off pretty quickly but I stop it just as quick and let them know that when I'm in the classroom everyone has the right to feel safe and be who they are. Any other type of negative attitude or putting others down will not be tolerated and if they can't handle that some people are gay then they can leave the room and head to the office and explain it there. I've only had that happen less than one time in my past 3 and a half years. Usually it's middle school or lower grade high school makes who feel the need to express themselves in such a negative way towards others. I also have done many programs on homophobia and specific LGBT issues such as bullying and harassment but I think I'll hold off until others answer too so I can see what they are up to in their classrooms.
Tina	Thanks Tina. You really hit some sensitive topics in your classroom. How do you build a sense of safety with your students? Do you lay out any other ground rules? I would love to hear others respond to Tina's approach as well as your own.
Jennifer	Oh ground rules! Yes, I forgot to add that. There are always ground rules. If in a one shot program the ground rules are put out at the beginning stating that in every classroom, in every school, each student has the right to be themselves. Everyone has an opinion and everyone has the right to feel safe as well as have an opinion anyone in the classroom. This becomes tricky at times not only with LGBT issues but hot topics like abortion and contraceptives as well. I let them know that I am there to give accurate information, not sway opinions or tell them how to live their lives. But, if in the case that I hear something that could be hurtful to another I do let them know that I am there to help them out on it. I have had many students thank me for doing that after class because it let them know that I was someone they could trust and who would listen to them afterwards. I've only had a problem come up during a program, but many many many stay after to talk to me because I was a 'safe and trusted' adult who is non-judgemental. Such a great feeling! Though I do say at times too to hear the things they are going through.
Tina	I am working on sexuality and gender issues within the English classroom. I always preface my syllabi with a disclaimer about the types of content in the class, and ask that the students sign a contract agreeing to the syllabus and classroom policies, which includes being respectful for everyone in the classroom. I also have a little blurb about the need to read the syllabus completely and understand that they are agreeing to participate in a class. If they cannot handle such a class, they should find another section of the course. The university administration and my dept. like

Figure 2 - Excel format of data

After struggling with Excel for one month, I found a very helpful article from La Pelle (2004) on using Word to analyze data, and I started over on the analysis using Word. However, by this time I did have all the data loaded into an Excel file, with multiple tabs utilized, one for each question. Although this format was not helpful for data analysis, I have found it helpful for post-analysis reference, so I have continued to use it minimally. Figure 3 is a screen shot of how the tabs were laid out in Excel.

9	Jennifer	Thanks Tina. You really hit some sensitive topics in your classroom. How do you build a sense of safety with your students? Do you lay out any other ground rules? I would love to hear others respond to Tina's approach as well as your own.
10	Tina	Oh ground rules! Yes, I forgot to add that. There are always ground rules. If in a one shot program the ground rules are put out at the beginning stating that in every classroom, in every school, each student has the right to be themselves. Everyone has an opinion and everyone has the right to feel safe as well as have an opinion anyone in the classroom. This becomes tricky at times not only with LGBT issues but hot topics like abortion and contraceptives as well. I let them know that I am there to give accurate information, not sway opinions or tell them how to live their lives. But, if in the case that I hear something that could be hurtful to another I do let them know that I am there to help them out on it. I have had many students thank me for doing that after class because it let them know that I was someone they could trust and who would listen to them afterwards. I've only had a problem come up during a program, but many many many stay after to talk to me because I was a 'safe and trusted' adult who is non-judgemental. Such a great feeling! Though I do say at times too to hear the things they are going through.
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		Question 3 Question 3A Question 4 Question 4A Question 5 Question 5A All Questions

Figure 3 - Tabs in Excel

I then created a table in Word in which all the data from the site was cut and paste into a column. I messed around with various formats for quite a while, including a four-column approach which included the columns Name, Comment, Rough Code, and Code. Name indicated the participant alias, Comment was the utterance of the participant, rough code was what I was

calling in vivo coding, and code was where I would place the coding number. Figure 4 is an example of this format.

Name	Comment	Rough Code	Code
Elin	I logged in without a problem.		
Jennifer	Welcome Elin. Glad to have you here.		
Delta	Delta..... logged in just fine!		
Jennifer	Hi Delta - glad you're here.		

Figure 4 - Tables in Word

Eventually, I found this to be challenging when sorting and resorting data, so I developed a different four column format. These included Participant ID (to identify which participant responded), Theme Code (a numeric tracking back to the codebook), Comment (what the participant said), and Sequence # (a numeric value placed on an utterance so I could sort and re-sort data while always being able to go back to the original utterance order). Figure 5 is an example of this. I also bolded my utterances, to make them easily identifiable throughout the coding process.

Participant Name	Theme Code	Comment	Sequence #
Elin		<b>I logged in without a problem.</b>	1
Jennifer		<b>Welcome Elin. Glad to have you here.</b>	2
Delta		<b>Delta..... logged in just fine!</b>	3
Jennifer		<b>Hi Delta - glad you're here.</b>	4

Figure 5 - Final Word format



Initially, I developed 114 first-tier codes from this analysis in Excel. Figure 6 is an example of the format I used for tracking. I eventually abandoned this method of coding, as it was cumbersome. The column Category was intended to be the broader categories as I delved further into coding (although I never got to that point prior to abandoning Excel), Code was my initial first-tier codes, and Usage was the number of times this code was utilized.

Category	Code	Usage
	Coming out	6
	Humor	6
	Males vs. females	6
	Contraceptives in middle school	5
	Homophobia	5
	Administrators	4
	Contract	4
	Activity	3
	Contraceptives	3
	Critical thinking	3
	Home schooled students	3
	No parental complaints	3
	Questions	3
	Sexual acts	3
	Age	2
	Birth control	2
	College	2
	Conservative community not open to LGBTQ	2
	Different schools	2
	Discomfort by students	2
	Female participation	2
	Feminism	2
	Hispanics	2
	Inclusive language	2

Figure 6 - Code tracking

I then began developing the first-tier rough codes into numeric theme codes for second tier coding. After second-tier coding, I still had 43 codes, and so I did a third-tier coding, followed by

a fourth tier coding, which got me in an optimal range (somewhere between five to seven) of five themes (Saldana, 2009; Lichtman, 2006;). I did this in Word, and Figure 7 is an example of how this was structured. Level indicated themes and subthemes, with a level one indicating a larger category of themes, level twos as subthemes of level ones, and level threes as subthemes of level twos. In the example below, openness (1.26) is a subtheme of pedagogy (1.25), which falls under the larger category of classroom management (1.00).

Level			Theme
1	2	3	
1.00			Classroom management
	1.05		Contract
	1.10		Acceptable behavior and ground rules
	1.15		Battles to fight
	1.20		Class time limited
	1.25		Pedagogy
		1.26	Openness
		1.27	Share knowledge
		1.28	Teach healthy lifestyles
		1.29	Whole being approach
		1.30	Feminism (as a guiding construct for what is acceptable in classroom)
	1.35		Safety
	1.40		Humor

Figure 7 - Three-level coding

In order to add structure, I utilized La Pelle's coding methodology (2004) along with Saldana's multi-tier coding cycle specific for ethnographic coding (2009). LaPelle's coding methodology (2004) is a seven step process that involves formatting the data into tables including participant IDs and utterance sequences; developing a theme codebook; determining categories on which analysis will be done; thematic coding; sorting the data by categories as deemed appropriate earlier; validating the coding; and merging codes as necessary. Saldana's multi-tier coding cycle specific for ethnographic coding (2009) involves two levels of coding, including first tier coding, utilizing a descriptive coding technique (Saldana, 2005; Wolcott, 1994). Descriptive coding utilizes a word or short phrase to summarize the basic topic of a passage of

data (Saldana, 2009). Descriptive coding utilizes a descriptive coding process, as indicated in its name, to help form themes (Wolcott, 1994). This laid the groundwork for second tier coding, where I reassembled themes based off of keywords (Wolcott, 1994). The combination of the LaPelle's practical structure of coding, which provided an infrastructure for my data, when mixed with Saldana's coding structure, which allowed for the vivid descriptors I wanted to later create an ethnodrama, provided a theoretically and structurally sound framework for my data analysis.

I began by formatting the data into tables, matching each with an utterance sequence number. The sequence number became very important since, as participants were interacting in the group asynchronously, at times one participant logged in and commented on multiple streams within a fifteen minute time period, which would not occur in a typical face-to-face focus group. I also created space within my table to enter rough codes.

Second, I developed a theme codebook. Using Saldana's (2009) three-tier coding approach, I began by applying a descriptive coding, or topic coding technique (Wolcott, 1994). Descriptive coding summarizes in short phrases or words the basic topic of a passage of data. I was then able to begin a second-tier subcoding process, and finally a third-tier subcoding process. I attempted to follow Lichtmann's (2006) projections that most qualitative research studies in education generate eighty to 100 codes in the first tier, fifteen to twenty categories in the second tier, and five to seven major concepts on the third tier. However, I ended up using a four-tier coding process due to the complexity of the data generated in an online format. I initially generated 114 first tier codes and whittled it down to 83 codes in the second tier. Using a frequency analysis methodology to help additional trimming, I was able to generate twenty-five third-tier codes, and finally five four-tier codes.

### **The soundness of this research**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) have argued that reliability and validity are inappropriate in the context of qualitative inquiry. Due to the subjective nature of qualitative inquiry, they argue that truth is a relative concept. A narrow positivist approach often deemed qualitative studies invalid if they did not result in numbers (Kvale, 1995). Therefore, Lincoln and Guba (1985) used different terms to judge the quality of research. The terms they recommended include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I will utilize these terms as they are more appropriate for a queer ethnographic study. These methods of confirming the soundness of my study acknowledge that it is challenging for an external source to validate my reality. Since my perspective is integrated throughout the interpretation, I will verify my own views using these four criteria but as a public researcher, the final source of verification will be my readers.

### **Credibility**

Credibility involves establishing that the analysis and interpretation of results in qualitative research are credible or believable from the perspective of the participants in the research (Trochin, 2006). It depends greatly on the richness of the data gathered and the ability of the researcher to analyze data (Patton, 1990). Credibility is typically done in feminist ethnographic framework through member checks. Member checks involve finding a way for the participants to review the material in some way (Janesick, 2000). As mentioned previously, transcripts were made available to all participants and I asked for comments and clarifications wherever they deemed it was important to ensure transcription clarity. In addition, they were also presented with the brief narratives written about each of them.

Data gained from interviews and my own writing was consistently cross-checked. I shared transcripts with three peers on a regular basis to get feedback on where I was with analysis, to have another set of eyes review where I was going, and to offer me advice. In addition, I shared my journals with them as well, as they felt that this would be helpful in understanding my journey through the research. Also, one of the advantages of an online focus group is that my advisor was able to observe all aspects of the process and send me feedback when needed. His presence on the site was shared with all participants as well, and it was an extra layer of preparedness for me to know that both I and my participants could contact him at any point with questions. Throughout the process, I contacted my advisor five times to ensure I was handling the research process appropriately, and to the best of my knowledge none of the participants contacted him.

I utilized my peer support group extensively, the peers with whom I had discussions regularly, to whom I showed data and writings and to whom I listened and bitched and absorbed. Over the course of the study, I physically met with someone from my support group ten times. Sometimes we met in groups, sometimes alone, sometimes using technology. My support group, however, preferred that meetings be face-to-face, even if this meant using a webcam, because they could read my stress level by my face. Incidentally, we did have discussion via email as well, seventeen times since the study was launched to be exact to review a piece of writing as well as all journals and interview transcripts.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the degree the research representations can be generalized into other contexts (Trochin, 2006). As a researcher I cannot provide information on the transferability of my findings, but rather I can provide sufficient information so readers can

determine how applicable the findings are to a new situation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Transferability can be difficult to achieve in a queer ethnographic situation. I attempt to provide as much information as possible about the situations of the participants so readers can determine transferability, and this is the best way for this to be determined (Patton, 2002). The ability to translate is the hallmark of transferability, and therefore, it is critical that I find ways for readers to make personally relevant (or transferable) connections to their lived circumstances.

A challenge which faces the concept of transferability is the dependence on interactive dynamics between the researcher and the participants, or the relationship forged between us (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). During this study, my relationships were pivotal to successful research. Therefore, recreating this study environment would be a challenge, for this study is dependent on specific people answering specific questions at a specific time. This is also why it is critical I provide strong documentation throughout about my methodology as well as translatable connections into lived experiences.

### *Dependability and confirmability*

Dependability “emphasizes the need for the researcher to account for the ever-changing context within which research occurs. The researcher is responsible for describing the changes that occur in the setting and how these changes affected the way the researcher approached the study” (Trochin, 2006, n.p.). As a researcher I am responsible for maintaining detailed records on the research setting and any changes which occurred within the study as it progressed. As I moved through the research process, I continually kept multiple audit streams open to review processes and products to ensure consistency. I not only had my advisor involved in the online focus group to offer feedback as needed, but I also had a weekly peer debriefing with colleagues who are familiar with the field and my work to test ideas, help me determine next steps, and

review writings. Each week, I submitted materials to them as a group in an electronic format, and they then responded with thoughts and ideas to me independently. I also met with them as a group on a regular basis to discuss, for an hour. Some weeks all three colleagues were present at the meeting, whereas other weeks it was just myself and one person. We began meeting in November 2009, and the only weeks we did not meet were weeks where I had not written anything new or when schedules made this complicated for the participants. To date, we have communicated electronically 64 times and face-to-face eighteen times. This process continued from the beginning of the Institutional Review Board process to the defense of this dissertation.

Confirmability refers to the degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Trochin, 2006). There are many strategies a researcher can use in this regard, including a confirmability audit, an audit trail, crystallization, reflexivity, and peer review, all of which I employed and mentioned previously. A confirmability audit, which is an external audit by a researcher not involved in this process, was utilized extensively and explained above. An audit trail was kept throughout, including the raw data, notes, codebook drafts, process notes, journals, the proposal, personal writings, and the website itself. Reflexivity was utilized through the journaling process which occurred during the research study. Crystallization involved the use of numerous methods of analyzing data. Crystallization “provides us with deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic” (Richardson, 2000, p. 522). My own writings and recollections were compared alongside research transcripts by my peer auditors. In addition, my committee offered much feedback in relation to the focus group, questions to develop, sampling and process, and literature. These can all be used to support the confirmability of the research process.

## Representation

Several scholars of qualitative research, acknowledging all research as a performance of some kind, have encouraged experimentation with new forms of representing research, including performative forms (Denzin, 2001, 1997; Goodall, 2000; Miencazowski, 2001; Bagley and Cancienne, 2002; Jipson and Paley, 1997). In ethnodrama, participants and the researcher may be a part of the performance or portrayed by actors. There is much debate over “the tension between an ethnodramatist’s ethical obligation to re-create authentic representation of reality (thus enhancing fidelity), and the license for artistic interpretation of that reality (thus enhancing the aesthetic possibilities)” (Saldana, 2005, p. 32). Therefore, it is important that I spend time reflecting on my own agenda within my writing. I utilize a series of reflective questions developed by Richardson (2000):

1. *Substantive contribution.* Does the piece contribute to our *understanding* of social life? [Do I] demonstrate a deeply grounded (if embedded) social scientific perspective? How has this perspective informed the construction of the text?...
2. *Aesthetic merit....* Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Does the use of creative analytic practices open up the text, invite interpretive responses?...
3. *Reflexivity.* [Am I] cognizant of the epistemology of postmodernism? How did [I] come to write this text? How was the information gathered? Are there ethical issues? How has [my] subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text?...
4. *Impact.* Does this affect others? Emotionally? Intellectually? Does it generate new questions?...
5. *Expression of a reality.* Does this text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived experience? Does it seem “true” – a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the “real” (p. 937)?

By utilizing these guideposts with a postmodern lens, I challenge assumptions I may have as I enter into research and recognize that the search for “truth” is more than a search for science but also includes morals, intellect, art, emotions, and intuition. For example, in the search for an expression of reality, I am searching for a lived experience of a participant and the meanings she applies to that reality, not a confirmation of a greater “truth” culturally. Then, as I apply this knowledge, I am able to bring a participant’s perception of reality to the piece I am creating. I



find it critical to have reflective guideposts such as Richardson's above, for who I am and what I study is tied to how I discipline myself when I claim a subject as knowledge. It also allows me a closer connection to queer theory, which theoretically shapes my research and challenges me to question the authority of traditional forms and methods; to write on topics in a manner which matters to me personally; to experiment; to locate myself within my work; to find ways as an a/r/tographer to share my work without feeling univocal; to reflect; to not flinch; and to honor myself (Richardson, 2000). I found no literature on applications for performance ethnography, and I struggled with translating an online medium into ethnotheatre, since I had no visual cues to utilize throughout.

### ***The Ethnodrama***

The final result of this study will be an ethnodrama incorporating the words of the participants, my own writings, and some basic information about the field of sex education and rural America. The piece will be performance ready and weave multiple voices together in a way that allows for both generalizations from the findings as well as lived experiences of those participating. It is my intention to have a performance-ready, publishable script to be performed after the completion of this dissertation.

## Chapter 5

### THE DATA

#### Introducing the Educators

*the actor  
steps into  
the light  
and we  
the audience  
concentrate*

*-the theatre by Monica Prendergast*

This snippet from Prendergast’s longer poem reveals the desire for me as a researcher to uncover the passion for sex education that study participants showed throughout the study period. As mentioned previously, sex educators interacted virtually during a two-week period via an online focus group in support of my attempt to determine how rural sex educators create environments that are inclusive to queer students. Multiple themes emerged from this online focus group, and all have at their core how sex educators queer their spaces, or make room for queer students.

Determining “who” is teaching sex education has proven difficult throughout this study, as can be seen by the varied backgrounds of the participants. For me, locating the nine sex educators in this study who all professed to attempt to be inclusive to queer students in their classrooms was truly a gift. Having the opportunity to work with them was both enlightening and uplifting as a researcher.

This chapter provides insights into these discussions and also introduces my participants and their self-reported classrooms behaviors and philosophies. I begin by providing a brief overview of each participant. It is imperative that confidentiality be maintained, as it was not only a condition of the study but also a need reiterated by many participants. Toward this end,

each participant has reviewed her or his introduction to ensure participants' comfort in relation to feeling safe and protected with what is being disclosed.

All nine of the participants indicated they taught sex education in a public school setting in a rural environment, attempted to create an inclusive environment for queer students, and had a minimum of fifteen contact hours of sex education specific teaching per year within the last five years. Alison, Carol, Delta, and Elin all taught health education in one rural school district only, covering both middle school and high school. Anne and Tina taught sex education specifically across numerous school districts and ages. Christi managed a staff of sex educators who taught across numerous districts and ages, and she has also taught sex education herself. Harry taught science in one district at the middle school level. Finally, Manny taught English at multiple public colleges with a high number of rural students.

### **Educators' Personal Stories**

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge some of the personal stories of the participants, as these served as a great topic of conversation between participants. These stories are relevant for the future of sex education, in that they helped future education leaders understand where these educators come from, and how best to recruit for the future.

In Anne's case, she came via theatre.

I kind of felt called to do this work...I have a BFA in pre-professional acting. I never intended to be a "sexpert," never really even thought twice about it. I was working at a community theatre when I got a call from someone asking if I knew anyone who would be interested in starting up a grant funded theatre troupe. The main goal was pregnancy prevention, but with a focus on many other types of social issue topics. I had just finished doing a yearlong tour for elementary kids on sexual abuse and found that I had a passion for educational theatre, so I jumped at the chance and said yes please, hire me! It eventually led me to a full time job, doing educational theatre half the time and sex education the other half. I have done a lot of soul searching during this job and remember small things about my "sex education" or lack thereof and have come to

realize, how much I missed out on, by not having any formal comprehensive sexuality education.

Delta was also drawn to sex education through the “lack” that she saw. She came to sex education through nursing.

Why I got into sex ed: 1. lack of info when I was a kid 2. working as an OB/GYN nurse for years I was appalled at the lack of knowledge adults have of their bodies, how they function day to day and for pleasure 3. the pervading attitude in our society that sex is “bad, dirty, hush-hush”... no one hesitates to speak about how another organ system functions (cardiac, respiratory, digestive, etc.) but GOD forbid we talk about the uterus, vagina, penis, testicles.... I wanted kids to hear that it is ok, sex is good. Perhaps more relationships would work, long term, if we openly communicated about sex, our needs in sexual relationships and what our bodies like best. 4. it is just plain fun, everyone truly is interested, even if we were socialized to NOT talk about it!

Manny identifies as a queer of color, and his reason for getting involved are through his own experiences in Los Angeles and with the queer community. Eventually, he found his way to queer theory, which solidified his background and his academic interests, and he utilizes both in his classrooms.

I use the personal as the political in my classrooms, from feminist theory, so I do tell my students I identify as a queer of color, and that I was raised by Latina and African American drag queens in the 1980s in Southern California as a teen--they took me under their wing and taught me how to fight back at a time with AIDS hysteria and when there were no LGBT campus groups for me to attend.

...I fell into queer theory as a graduate student (one who first hated theory and used to kick his theory books around in the apartment as a master's student and then burned them outside one semester in the Midwest). But, now that I've “got it,” I want to share my knowledge with younger generations. I'm not interested in procreation or anything like that, so I find what I do in terms of teaching is the rearing of another generation...a queer kinship. I love what I do and I am very, very passionate about it. I don't ever want to lose that energy...and if so, I need to retire. The energy that I bring to classes is what motivates students no matter what the content...I always tell my students: “I'm really trying to teach you something!”

Finally, Tina just wandered into sex education, and doesn't want to do anything else. She also identifies with her own lack of education as a starting point for her interest in the field.

I joined the affiliate I work on a total whim. I was bored at my job which was 9-5 and at a weight loss clinic. This was not a feminist place, nor a pro-choice place, it was a 'Give me your money and I'll tell you what to eat' place. Not my kind of fun.

But before all that, in college I had been a part of demonstrations, one riot (oops), protests and in many feminist and Pride clubs. I always knew all this anger and fervor that I had would do me good some day. It was anger at the education I had received about sex and sexuality in high school. Really, there was NOTHING offered to us other than a video of a woman giving birth and one class on how 'gay people get HIV so don't be gay'. Seriously, that was my class. Run by a very religious teacher which was a friend of our family.

My parents never talked about and when I got to college it was like a whole new world had opened up. Some of it good, some of it very very scary, like who knew you could get herpes/chlamydia/HPV from sex? Any kind for that matter!? I was blown away by how much we were sheltered from and how much I was told how to act and what to do and what to wear.

I knew I wanted to help others who might be like me and not of gotten the education I had. It finally happened after many years (went to high school in the 90s) when at that dead end 'Hey, you're fat' job I found an opening on the sexual health educators team. I was thrilled! Then thought, oh no...What if I'm not feminist enough? Pro-Choice enough? But turns out I have not looked back.

Providing answers is motivated through personal experience with a lack of answers or support for many educators, regardless of differences in location, gender, or field of teaching.

Elin references how rewarding it is to see a student make a connection between a class conversation and “real life” in her classroom.

Teaching middle and high school students can be stressful and tiring, but I can't imagine doing anything else. It's exciting to see a kid make a connection between something you presented in class and their real lives.

## **Introducing the Cast**

How these sex educators create inclusive environments for queer students in rural environments was initially revealed during online focus group interviews as they reflected on their experiences. The participants also compared and contrasted their stories with one another. The online focus group process created opportunities for them to share not only their current

experiences, but in some cases their childhood/teenage background and how this impacted their teaching. Being retrospective about their own sex education helped many of the educators recognize their own motivation and how this shapes them in their rural environments.

All the educators in the study have slightly different relationships to sex education, and it is important to take time to get to know them. In addition, with confidentiality a critical concern for many in this study, there are also pieces of information I do not include in order to best protect their anonymity.

In Table 3, you will see various pieces of information regarding the participants which they feel comfortable sharing. Half of the participants taught in multiple environments, ranging from schools to community organizations to colleges. The other half taught in one district, although sometimes across numerous schools. In the employer column, it can be seen that the majority of educators in the study were employed by school districts, with those employed by non-profit organizations coming in a close second. One participant, Manny, was employed by numerous entities, all of which were college level. All participants employed by non-profit organizations taught in multiple teaching environments, and all participants employed by a school district taught exclusively in that district. In relation to age level, the majority of participants taught both middle school and high school, with one educator, Harry, teaching middle school exclusively, and one educator, Manny, teaching college exclusively. Finally, the majority of educators in the study indicated they teach health education or sex education, with one participant, Harry, teaching science and another, Manny, teaching English. Following this table are more complete descriptions of each of the participants.

Table 3 - Background information on sex educators

Name of Educator	Gender	Teaching Environment	State	Employer	Age Level	Self-Labeled Field of Teaching
Alison	Female	One district	NY	School district	Middle school High school	Health education
Anne	Female	Multiple	IA	Non-profit organization	Middle school High school	Sex education
Carol	Female	One district	NY	School district	Middle school High school	Health education
Christi	Female	Multiple	NY	Non-profit organization	Middle school High school	Sex education
Delta	Female	One district	NY	School district	Middle school High school	Health education
Elin	Female	One district	NY	School district	Middle school High school	Health education
Harry	Male	One district	OR	School district	Middle school	Science education
Manny	Male	Multiple	HI	Multiple colleges	College	English
Tina	Female	Multiple	NY	Non-profit organization	Middle school High school	Sex education

### *Alison*

Alison teaches in one school district in rural New York, and is the only health educator in her district. She shared freely with me that she is married and has daughters. She was one of the few educators in the study who worked exclusively with one district, and she was also one of the freest educators, meaning her district allowed her to discuss a wide range of topics. She was very communicative with me in relation to getting into the study, the times she would be unavailable, and how she planned on making up any missed questions.

Alison discussed contraceptive education in her middle school and high school classes, which was startling to many of the participants who were not allowed to discuss contraception at all. She believes that she is able to discuss contraceptives with younger students due to the fact

that she teaches in a rural area where there are four colleges within a ten mile radius. She openly shared activities she used in her classroom. She was also not afraid to discuss queer issues in her classes.

Listening to Alison tell her stories was a worthwhile experience for me personally, for it instilled a sense of hope that not all rural school administrators were interested in maximizing federal funding even if it meant compromising in the area of sex education. I noticed that she kept continually repeating that she teaches health, meaning that if it is health-related, she taught it. It was apparent to me that her first priority was always her students' well-being and safety, and the school allowed her to maintain that priority with integrity. She strongly believes students should be educated on all aspects of sexuality, whether queer or not, because not having sexual information can develop into a personal health and safety issue. Many in the study expressed jealousy over the openness of her school environment.

### ***Anne***

Anne is a very respectful communicator. She did not hesitate to contact me regarding some concerns she felt over the ways in which other educators handled some of the topics during the study, citing research within the field as a basis for her reasoning. Once, she and I developed a question to further probe why some of the educators would handle difficult situations in the manner they indicated. She served multiple rural schools. In addition, Anne also teaches in alternative schools and in-treatment rehab centers.

Anne expressed envy over some of the other educators' ability to teach contraception education in seventh grade, since this was not possible where she works in Iowa, and she even joked "Not here, kids don't start having sex until they're seniors!" She was often frustrated by the attitude that students were not having sex, one she experienced often, and even offered



various ways of helping communities address sexual health issues, but with limited progress.

Anne was quite open during the study, and shared stories often.

Anne also feels strongly that humor plays a large role in her work, and indicated she often feels like a comedian. In addition to humor, Anne also uses the performing arts with her students to explore sexuality. Due to her position across multiple districts, Anne also has the opportunity to view how her interventions are received in various types of environments.

Anne feels very passionately about her work, which she stated is “a calling,” although her initial training was not in the field but was, in fact, in acting. Her own lack of education in sexuality as a student also shaped her desire to become a “sexpert,” as she calls it.

### ***Carol***

Carol participated in the study using her real name rather than the pseudonym assigned. Carol is a recently retired sex educator from upstate New York who taught in a rural district at the high school and middle school levels. In addition, she worked as a contributor to the New York State Health Education Guidance Document as a curriculum designer. As the document was being developed, she assisted in writing curriculum and then giving feedback during the editing process. She kindly shared the document with me at the end of the study so that I could specifically see how New York State handles issues related to queer students. She continues to present curriculum writing workshops for health educators.

Carol had the ability to be rather open in her school district, and shared some examples of how she was able to talk about challenging topics and address queer issues when she was working with parents. Carol often employed teachable moments in her classrooms to help address resistance. She mentioned that at times she has employed the assistance of the high school principal, particularly in relation to sexual harassment. Her teaching style, according to her, is

very clear, and she constantly explains herself and her motives, so that all students feel welcome in her class.

### *Christi*

Christi is a program coordinator who manages five staff that teach sex education in rural New York, although she has also taught sex education within the last five years. Her program covers an entire rural county currently, and she has a range of experiences with sex education across many rural communities. She works with students at both the middle and high school level. In addition, she coordinates a peer education program.

Christi felt strongly that discussing sex is challenging in a rural environment. In her county, she has been working on an initiative to educate parents on how to have a conversation with their children about sex. While developing this program, discussions have at times wandered into queer arenas, often with limited levels of support from administrators and community members. Also, while trying to educate via a poster campaign about queer topics, Christi has experienced harsh community criticism, although not from her students.

Since Christi coordinates county-wide services, she often has very limited time in the classrooms she serves. Her classes “push” into other courses, primarily health-related although not exclusively so, and so she may be working with a class for one period only. Her programs stress “risk reduction,” but she always makes certain, regardless of time constraints, that “whoever you are attracted to there will be information in this lesson(s) for you.” Her Peer Educator program, which she indicated is a “five to one ratio of females to males,” is much more time-intensive and queer-inclusive.

She indicated her peer educator program focuses primarily on pregnancy prevention, but that her program is really the most inclusive and extensive look at human sexuality that these

students receive. However, she also noted that, despite the lack of an extensive conversation in the schools, “I rarely have a homophobic slur shouted out at the [high school] level. Some, I’m sure, think it but, by and large, they are respectful enough not to shout out something...”

### ***Delta***

Similar to Alison, Delta teaches exclusively in one school district in rural New York. Although she indicated she does not have a specific queer curriculum, she works on answering any and all questions related to queer topics. Due to some of the restrictions she faces about sex education in general, it is easy for me to see why getting a formal queer curriculum may be difficult. However, even with these restrictions, Delta does not shy away from queering her classroom.

In such an open atmosphere for questions, it is no surprise that Delta gets questions on a lot of taboo topics, including blow jobs, anal sex, group sex, rainbow parties, pornography, virginity, orgasm, and the G spot. Delta feels that if she does not provide answers, students will find them or make them up for themselves, and she wants them to know the truth about their sexuality in order to make healthy decisions. She indicated that she feels as if her profession is viewed as “non academic” and “unimportant” because of the lack of standardized exams in her area. However, she entered the field after working as an ob/gyn nurse once she realized that most people did not have sufficient information about their own bodies.

Delta noticed a distinct gender divide in her classroom, with males “dominating” the conversation. Consequently, Delta has a strict set of “manners” which she uses to keep order in her classroom, and this works for her. She has never had to specifically mention queer students as a separate group needing respect because her rules make it clear that everyone is included. At the same time, she also indicates that no one “comes out” in her district, because she does not

“think [doing so] would be a comfortable thing for kids in such a conservative community, despite a health classroom that offers kindness and acceptance.” Delta’s experience growing up in a rural environment, going away to college, and then returning has shaped her experience.

### *Elin*

In the past five years, Elin has taught at two different rural school districts in New York. Similar to Anne, Elin has noticed a disturbing trend in teen pregnancy in her current district. It seems to her that the community and families in her area almost appear to promote teen pregnancy.

Elin was inspired to teach by a high school health teacher.

What struck me about his class was his openness to discuss "taboo" topics and that he was never shocked by student's questions or comments. Growing up in a house where sex was never mentioned, I truly appreciated the matter of fact method of his teaching.

Thinking back through her own experiences, Elin was drawn to teach sex education.

Even at [a] young age I knew that was what I wanted to do.... I worked for a non-profit organization for a short time teaching health ed to adults. I wasn't passionate about the job and felt like I wasn't making the impact on my community like I had hoped. I went back to school to get my teaching degree and I've never been happier.

Elin also feels that there are many people in her district who are supportive of queer students, but this may not be apparent to the students themselves. She is certain students come to her with issues because she has the opportunity to talk about her support for them in class, whereas some of the other teachers and administrators may not feel they can due to their subject area or responsibilities. Elin specifically mentions the school counselor and principal as just two examples of school employees she knows are supportive allies but who often do not have the opportunity to share their supportiveness publicly or in a classroom.

### ***Harry***

Like Alison and Elin, Harry taught sex education in one school district. Unlike others, his teaching duties were for middle school (seventh and eighth grades) only. His school district, in rural Oregon, had only 35 students per grade. Harry teaches in a science context. He taught sex education until 2008. Harry believes that students who have an agricultural background are more informed in relation to reproduction and anatomy.

Harry has also run into the conservative views mentioned by others in his rural environment. Like others, he agrees that administrators really shape the environment. In his district, all the administrators not only came from rural environments but actually graduated from the schools where they now work. In relation to queer students, Harry agrees with Carol that there are challenges in rural environments which make it uniquely difficult to offer support to them.

Although Harry participated actively throughout the study, he did not offer much in the way of personal information throughout the experience, as did many of the others. His introduction is a bit shorter than the others' because he typically addressed the questions throughout without revealing much personal information. As this was not a requirement for the study, and with concerns for identity being at the forefront of my consciousness throughout this study, I did not ask for any additional information.

### ***Manny***

Manny was an interesting fit to the study, for although he met all study requirements – taught sex education in a public school environment in the last five years, attempted to address queer issues in his classroom, taught a minimum of fifteen hours of sex education specific

instruction, and worked with rural students – he did so in ways I did not anticipate as a researcher. Manny teaches at multiple public institution of higher education in Hawaii, some of which are located in urban areas, but all serve a large rural population. When I was considering Manny for the study, I asked him for more detail about how he believed he served a rural population, and he provided me with additional information. I learned a lot from Manny's information on rural Hawaii, and how even the urban areas in Hawaii are not the same as mainland urban areas. In addition, beyond Honolulu, every other part of Hawaii is considered rural. Therefore, Hawaiians who travel to his universities are almost all from rural backgrounds. After multiple exchanges, I became convinced that Manny belonged in the study and would add a unique perspective. Below is the text from one such exchange.

[My school] is quite a diverse campus that is comprised of many multi-ethnic and/or racialized groups of students. We do have some...white students from middle-class...U.S. here. However, Hawaii is very working class and most of the students I have in my classrooms come from more "rural" areas in Hawaii. Most of the privileged students in Hawaii go to private schools and they attend big colleges on the mainland. This leaves many working class and "rural" students who use the public school system here, which is failing its students miserably. There is a "city" here...but parts of the island tend to be considered "country" because they are so far removed from the city life. There are also many students from outer islands who come from what we call "country." A mere drive around the island will show anyone that you can go from the city to a space or place that is completely isolated and a very small, tight-knit community of local families. So, I do think I serve more "rural" students who I have to teach about critical thinking and difference in culture, even though they come from Hawaii and the myth of paradise and racial harmony....I also think that what you might call "urban" on the mainland is very different from a city dweller here in Honolulu. Being from Los Angeles myself, I don't really think that there are urban people here....I do think that the majority of my students are all "rural" because they just don't have the city experience that someone like me might have from L.A....

Manny is also unique to the study in that he teaches in the English department at his institutions. However, the focus of his courses is sexuality and gender. I struggled with Manny's eligibility for the study, but his perspective is so unique and powerful that I am very glad he was included. He is the one participant who not only identified himself as queer during the study but also indicated he is a person of color.

Manny frequently reflects on his own queer experiences growing up in Los Angeles and how this has impacted him, particularly the biological familial rejection he faced and the warmth of the drag queen mothers who helped him through his own coming out experience. Throughout the study, Manny stated that, as a closeted kid in Southern California, he did not want any student to go through what he went through. As a graduate student, he discovered queer theory, and this helped him to marry his personal desire to help other queer students with his academic pursuits.

Due to the age difference between Manny's students and others in the study, Manny has had more experience with students coming out to him than other educators. Also, on his campuses, he sometimes has resources, like an LGBT Resource Center or student group, which high schools and middle schools often do not, particularly for referrals for crises. At the same time, since his students are typically not minors, parents do not often have the obligation of support and care and sometimes will leave students homeless and penniless, and Manny often has an obligation to help.

### ***Tina***

Tina also worked for an agency which served numerous school districts in rural New York across three counties. Tina began working for this organization four years ago, and began teaching sex education over three years ago. She indicated she has had some success in integrating queer issues into her classroom and group settings, and she consciously lets her students know that her classes are not only for heterosexual students. She advises a teen advocacy group that often does work in the schools, and she also runs programs in group homes, at colleges, and in detention homes. When she has the opportunity to visit a school numerous times, which is not always the case, she always devotes an entire class to queer issues. In

addition, she serves on the board at the regional level of a large queer-positive sex education organization.

Regardless of how long she has with a group, she states that “at the beginning of each of my sexual health programs, whether it be contraceptives or infections etc, I make the broad statement that the information is important for everyone to know regardless of who they are with or attracted to.” Even in the conversation regarding abstinence, Tina brings in a queer perspective through her first activity.

Tina was also one of the funniest participants, and shared her experience with carrying around a large-scale model of a female vulva and a big wooden penis. She also uses humor extensively in the classroom because she “think[s] humor helps them make it personal, that there are cures, there are treatments, it's not the end of the world and no, their penis will not fall off.”

Similar to Anne, Tina references using the performing arts to help students understand some of the more challenging topics. This is the place where humor and performance come together for Tina. She was one of the most vocal participants in relation to sharing how happy she was to be around so many other passionate sex educators.

### **My thoughts on the cast**

The online focus group structure, which utilized Google Groups, took a bit of adapting for the participants at first. The menus, which collapsed into categories, often became confusing to navigate as multiple participants engaged in the conversation. Compounding this was the confusion over multiple simultaneous conversations, some initiated by me and other initiated by participants to one another, thus further expanding the confusing menus. It became clear to me that, for both my sanity and the participants', I needed to send a daily email summarizing what had happened on the site in the past 24 hours. I did not anticipate having to do this when I started



the study, but doing so helped the participants contribute, as reading an email digest of responses was much less confusing. This was extremely time intensive for me, and often took over two hours an evening. However, through time and practice with a somewhat confusing conversation structure, participants began asking one another questions. There seemed to be quite a bit of bonding over both past sex education experiences they had encountered as students as well as the challenges of administrators. As the study progressed, some educators actually started calling their teaching experiences “utopian” compared to others, while others commented they were glad to finally have a community of educators as passionate about sex education as they are. The conversation often began at a very theoretical level, focusing on technique or approach or methodology, and moved into a very practical level, with participants asking each other if they used certain videos, sharing classroom activities, and querying why some school districts allowed certain topics at younger ages than others.

### **Emerging Themes**

The purpose of this study was to explore how rural sex educators create environments that are inclusive to queer students. The primary research questions include:

1. What programs and practices currently exist in rural environments which queer sex education?
2. What are the lived experiences of rural teachers who are – or are attempting to – queering sex education, and how can this inform practice?

In order to have a fuller understanding of the context of these lived experiences, two secondary questions also guide the study: “How do rural sex educators create environments which are

inclusive to queer students?” and “How do rural sex educators queer narrowly-defined concepts within sex education, such as abstinence, in ways that make them more inclusive?”

Due to the overlapping nature of the four themes – communities of engagement, classroom communities, questions, and critical thinking – which emerged, the themes are presented below independently, but quite often can be intermingled. As the coding and analysis process continued, it became increasingly difficult to separate one theme from another. For example, a student may ask a question (theme 3) and the teacher responds by teaching a critical thinking skill (theme 4), all of which occurred in a classroom community (theme 2), that she controls, and a larger community (theme 1) over which she has less control. The themes below, therefore, are often integrated in an effort to invite a more holistic understanding and appreciation of the data.

### **Communities of engagement**

The communities in which an educator teaches have a huge impact on what they teach in the sex education classroom, and the environments range from fully inclusive of queer sexuality to no discussion of any sexuality except in the context of heterosexual abstinence. Communities in this sense are inclusive of the sociocultural aspects of a community, the families which create and inhabit the community, geographic space (i.e. town, village, county) and school space (i.e. district, building). In all cases the geographic spaces and the school spaces, minus the classrooms, worked in tandem; at no point was there discussion of an administrator bucking the local town morals in relation to sex education, or vice versa – instead the two reflected a common vision. Classroom communities, however, are the one space where participants felt freer to “buck the system,” within reasonable limits. Tina, however, has an approach that seems to work across multiple rural environments. By presenting the big question of “What is sex?” Tina then brings

the conversation “naturally” into queer inclusivity. This allows Tina to be inclusive regardless of a larger community’s views on queer inclusivity.

The rural response to queer people and queer sexuality was typically not inclusive, and often viewed by the educators as conservative. Some educators reported offering to do LGBTQ sensitivity training but being rebuffed by school administrators and school boards due to religious beliefs of parents/communities, while others speak openly and frankly with parents regarding all aspects of sexuality and are applauded. There was some concern voiced about some conservative community members voicing an opinion that inclusive sex education was considered an insult to local morals. Delta felt that people in rural communities tend to remain conservative unless they have the opportunity to leave the area.

When the rural people have not made it out into the world at large, there seems to be more of a tendency towards conservatism and perhaps 'fear' of differences. Just my thoughts as a rural educator and a person who grew up in this very rural area, left and came back with more worldly views. I base my theory on my parents, who never left...and have very little 'worldly' experience. I also base my theory on peers I went to school with, K-12, in a rural school 20 minutes from where I now teach. Those peers who did not leave the area tend to be more conservative in their views and also more intolerant of anyone who is different.

Harry felt similarly.

As for [my town] being rural and how that affects teaching sex-ed, I think it makes it a little trickier due to the conservative views often held in small rural communities. I totally agree with an earlier statement on here that it is mostly up to the administrators. In my case, all the administrators (2 principals and a superintendent) graduated from the same school (which graduates about 30 students/year), so they are pretty tied into the town's conservative views.

Even with the ability to influence the behavior and words of students in their classrooms, teachers still feel that peer relationships are not always supportive of LGBT students. Carol theorizes this is due to the lack of anonymity in a rural setting.

In a rural school students often have known each other for years and know much about each other. I think it is more difficult for LGBTQ student to be anonymous in a rural setting.

Harry feels similarly.

I agree with Carol that it is very difficult for sexual minorities to be anonymous in rural communities. It is unlikely that anyone in the high school where I taught would openly admit to anything outside of what is considered "normal" for fear of being completely ostracized. When you only have 30 students in a grade, you just can't afford to risk alienating yourself! This doesn't mean that it's not discussed in class, but that it is difficult to see much result in such a homophobic area.

Delta once again reiterates that students leave in order to come out, with her sentiment "In my little rural school, no one would "come out" until after they graduate and leave the area." The fishbowl effect of rural communities makes the coming out process challenging for many students.

Manny feels he must be careful when handling parents, so he does not get involved in ways he feels may actually be harmful to the student.

I have also had a female student who felt empowered during my class to come out to her parents. They kicked her out of the house and cut her off financially. I had to get her some help from some lesbians I knew who allowed her to stay in their apartment until this student can find a job and place to live--to get on her feet. This happens quite often in my experience. Whenever you teach LGBT/ Queer issues in the classroom, you become mentor and counselor to your students and you must have the proper support systems in place on the campus you work at or at least know of some off campus....

I have to be careful though: some parents just want their kids in therapy or on medication to address this issue and I cannot really get involved in that sort of thing. I have had a couple students just disappear from class, drop from school, and I never hear from them again. So, in those two cases, I have no idea what happened to them and it does bother me a lot.

Alison, who works in a rural town with four colleges within ten miles, and only in one district, shares an experience of how a student in her district, which she deems as quite liberal, responded to a queer event on school grounds. This appears to run counter to the experiences of many educators who view their rural environments as more conservative and with less college access.

I teach in a rural area which is home to one college and one university, and within 10 miles there is another college and university. Because of this we have a diverse

community with tolerance to other cultures and ideas. Education is valued.

Discrimination of any kind is considered disrespectful and unacceptable. I teach health in one school district to 7th grade (12-13 year olds) and high school students in grades 10-12 (15-18 year olds). The district is small and I am the only district health teacher....

The district and my classes teach tolerance and diversity. Two years ago our school had a student lead "gay is okay" day. More than half the students wore colors in support of homosexual students. Other students said they forgot to dress in the colors but would have. I only heard from one student opposing the day. He decided not attend school that day because he said he was not in favor of homosexuality and would probably have gotten in a verbal argument with someone. He decided his best action was to stay home and avoid the day. That was his definition of tolerance.

Carol was also able to discuss queer issues openly, even though she is not in an area she labels as liberal, and thus is an exception to the educators' perceptions of rural environments as conservative. She shares an example below of how she was able to discuss queer issues openly.

In the middle and high school level I have found that discussion of HIV transmission is a good place to bring up the fact that the virus spread because people thought it was "a gay man disease." Heterosexual people thought they were immune and weren't really concerned about the fate of gay men, other human beings. Eventually a few women contracted the virus. Hospitals weren't prepared for women. This is also a way I was able to speak of the high risk nature of anal sex between people of any sex. Parents were ok when I explained myself.

Christi, on the other hand, had a rather challenging situation emerge in her district around queer issues.

Sex in general is difficult in a rural environment. Right now I am working on [getting] our county [to] adopt a parent support initiative to help parents carry on "conversations" with their children about sex and sexuality. We have had two public forums with a third scheduled for this coming Monday. The discussion at these forums each time has moved to LBGTQ issues and there is a good sized faction of our community that thinks [discussing these topics] is wrong and sinful. At these points I point out to parents that what we are trying to adopt is not a specific lesson that would debate any of this but that parents use all opportunities to share their personal values with their children and explain why they feel that way. In the classroom, however, we are teaching values clarification so that young people have the opportunities to discover their own value system but it is not our place to impose our values upon them.

We publish a teen health news letter weekly that is called Toilet Talk because it is hung in the stalls of the bathrooms. LBGTQ was a topic last year. An adult woman saw it and was offended, calling it an "Abomination of the Lord." There was a great commotion in the community and lawsuits threatened, but ultimately they backed down because what we had discussed was founded in good character education. Kindness, tolerance etc. I

find our teens are very open to LBGTQ. We have one HS based support group in the county. But the youth attitude is "what's the big deal?"

Tina had an extremely negative situation in a school where she was teaching, which resulted in her being labeled a lesbian. When she sought support from the classroom teacher, she did not receive it.

I was doing a program WAY up north at a vocational/ alternative/special needs school....I was brought in to do programs with special needs highly autistic younger students to talk about puberty, what is ok to do, what is not. Appropriateness was a big one. AND, same day, to talk to students in the small engine repair and shop class, 18 males, 1 female, about bullying. Which turned into a student shouting at me 'Did you used to be a man? Are you a lesbian? Is this why you know so much about being gay?' I chose to ignore his prompts as I don't feel the need to 'come out' as a married woman, or a feminist, or anything other than a sexual health educator.

The educators did seem to have a sense of when communities were homophobic, and they often got caught in the middle of allowing all students to be honest, which sometimes created an atmosphere that was challenging to manage. Elin related this directly to being in a rural environment.

I face a couple of struggles that relate to teaching in a rural place. The first one being the intense belief that homosexuality is wrong. It is a constant struggle to allow students to express their opinions and beliefs, while protecting other students and encouraging students who do not hold those same beliefs [that homosexuality is wrong to continue to feel free to express themselves].

Delta reiterated this, indicating LGBT information is not welcome in her town, but she values students' questions so therefore shares the information when asked. She also correlates this anti-queer stance to be directly related to being in a rural environment. She firmly believes in the importance of answering all questions, even if this goes against what is welcome on her location, particularly to address misconceptions.

In regards to sexual minorities.... info is not welcome in the rural school district I teach in. It is very conservative. However, I do not hesitate to ask questions when the kids bring things up; risky, but I have to be honest. If they have questions, they deserve answers....

It is a tough area as there are so many negative attitudes surrounding sexuality: bad, dirty, don't talk about it around kids, etc. The school district I am in is a rural, lower income, mostly blue collar and some very conservative Christian groups who believe sex education is a family thing (which means it does not happen in most cases). I wonder all the time if I am crossing a line that is going to get me in trouble. BUT I know what the kids are doing sexually, and they are active or very interested in being active NOW, and they need someone who is going to talk to them open & honestly. They have many misconceptions: no diseases or pregnancy from oral or anal sex; if it is not vaginal sex then they are not really having sex.... the list goes on.

In Anne's case, when a student came out to her after class one day, she connected him with some statewide support groups. However, the student refused to connect with these networks, for he is fearful of getting further help in case he is seen by someone he knows. This further reiterates the lack of community support the students feel outside of the classroom or sometimes the school. In Tina's case, with a group she runs, students do come out in the group environment but often are fearful to do so at home.

Many of the teens in the group identify as [LGBTQ] and the heterosexual teens are the minority for sure, though they are great allies. Many who have come out to us during meetings have NOT come out at home yet. Those who have were either shunned or kicked out.

In some cases, the educators themselves had to overcome larger community opinions related to queer issues in order to create queer-inclusive classrooms. In Elin's case, she had to overcome her own fears related to community backlash. Elin shared a story of a student who came to her because he was considering hurting himself because he was gay, which greatly impacted her as an educator. She was glad the student came to her, but also uncertain if the student would have known where else to turn.

He told me he was gay and that he had only told one of his friends. We sat and talked for a long time. Luckily, his family and friends were extremely supportive and loving....I think of this student when I am teaching and I realize it is my responsibility to make sure all students know that I care for them and that I support them. Since this experience, I incorporated lessons that deal specifically with GLBT issues. I don't feel like I have a good handle on these lessons yet, but anytime I feel anxious or question whether I teach them or not, I think of that student....

I think there are many other supportive people in my school, but I'm not sure the students are aware of them. They know they can come to me because I have the opportunity to

tell them in my class. I don't think they are aware of the services provided and I know we don't do enough in my school to make them aware. I try to encourage students to go to the counselor or principal, but we should do more to let kids know there are people who can help them.

Prior to this experience, Elin was hesitant to teach LGBT topics, due to fear of her conservative environment, for she had only been in her school district for a year. She indicated she used inclusive language and discouraged hateful language, but she did not specifically teach on LGBT issues. She indicated she is now embarrassed by this, but grateful that the student above showed her how important teaching these topics is. Experiences like this were reiterated by others, where they overcame the fear of challenging community values in order to serve the best interest of the students.

The values of the communities are often shaped by the parents with children in a district. The relationship of parents to sex educators in a community varies wildly, ranging from fully supportive to fully unsupportive. Alison shares her experience in her school district, where she views parents as having positive regard for her work, and even commented that she feels she teaches in a utopian environment compared to others.

Most parents ask what I teach in my health class. I mention first aid/ CPR, bullying, mental health, eating disorders and then I'll say sexuality including contraceptives, STI, and HIV. Most parents respond with that's great that you teach this. I have yet to have a parent state that their child should be removed from classes when discussing sexuality. I guess I teach in utopia compared to some of you.

Manny, however, reflects the opposite experience in relation to parents. It is important to note that Manny does not deal with parents in the college environment in the same way that those in middle or high school do.

I, however, have had to help students find ways to survive when parents disenfranchise them from home. I try to explain to them life goes on, though it's really, really hard to deal with this issue. I think the counseling center is most important for them at this point. I do show them *Queer as Folk* and they focus on the character of Justin and Debbie (PFLAG) and this seems to help them to understand the various responses to their coming out.



Tina has had some challenges within her community.

I haven't had much trouble....yet. Though I did write in to the local paper here and stupidly it was under my work email address and we had some people call the clinic and give me hell for it. Even though I was standing up for a teen and the topic was breast cancer awareness. Some places are moving backwards. I can only imagine if I wrote in about LGBTQ topics or abortion services. Which, btw- there is a local priest who wrote an AWFUL letter to the paper in regards to same sex marriage in this state. He was also at a domestic violence prevention board meeting that I'm a part of, saw my name (I knew who he was and was very upset at his backwards views and how he made many of my teens feel) - he never came back because he does not agree with my job either. Usually it's the older generation that has a problem with what I do and what I teach. I agree with the youth thinking "what's the big deal?" It's the parents and their parents that are set in their ways and not as easy to sway, even if it is for the better good of things and education that teens deserve. Same with the protesters outside of where I work. Mostly men, all 50+ with maybe a couple of home schooled grandkids that they bring for shock-brainwashing value. No one has protested me in the schools.....yet. Knock on wood!

Alison, Delta, and Manny referenced having to find students housing and/or support after being kicked out of the house for coming out. It is when providing this level of emotional support that all three also felt torn between what parents state they want in the sex education classroom and how they respond when LGBT issues are included. In their minds, a parent who would kick a student out of their home for being queer is not truly embracing inclusive sex education, even if they espouse this ideal. Delta shared her feelings on this through this statement.

Parents, I think, want us to address issues (perhaps so they do not have to, comfort level, perhaps) and yet it is a catch 22! If we do, there may be hell to pay!

Delta's statement reflects that sex educators may be caught in the battle of community values – wanting to create an inclusive environment for all, and being relatively successful in their classrooms, but having limited control outside of that sphere.

A final communities factor which became apparent through discussion was the impact of the teacher's relationship to a school district. Teachers who were solely based in one school or district seemed to have more control and support than teachers who were viewed as supplemental to the curriculum or not employed by a district. In Tina's case, however, she teaches in a variety of settings, including public schools, and so her curriculum varies widely.

Usually I always start with abstinence with grades 7-12 but in colleges or group homes/detention homes or even at a vocational alternative high school (I'm all over the place every week) I talk safer sex first, then abstinence. It really depends on where I am and who I'm talking to and what they are looking to get out of my information. I sometimes see people more than once, sometimes it's a one shot deal since my services do not cost anything and I'm grant funded.

In a school district where a teacher is a continual presence, it should not be surprising that the district is more engaged with sex education in general, and therefore teachers can “push the envelope” a bit more. Anne, who teaches in multiple districts, had the ability to compare and contrast a performance-based intervention she utilizes when she directed the same play in very different districts.

I am directing a play right now in a town that has a population of 1400. The script is all about high school life. It's a great script and really tells it like it is. The kids in the play are nervous about some of the lines....I've heard "That's really inappropriate" several times, not from the teachers/ parents, but from the students. Lines as simple as "Just be sure to use protection" or "You better watch out, or you'll get a STI." They are worried I'm gonna get fired for those racy words! I directed the play in a much larger school district and they wanted me to add more "Can't we say condom instead of protection?" Same types of kids, doing the same types of things, but the smaller school kids tend to be more sheltered I think and very worried discussing and hearing about this stuff. They want to learn, it's just really uncomfortable for them, I think maybe it's because they just haven't been exposed to talking about it.

Elin has been frustrated by limitations placed on content by local communities. In some communities, she believes teen pregnancy is expected, and would rather handle the pregnancy than allow her to teach about contraception and disease prevention.

Our district has had an increase in teen pregnancy that to me is disturbing, but the families and community seem to accept and even encourage this behavior. It is frustrating when you know a student has the skills and information to make good choices, but they don't have the support or even motivation from home to make those choices.

In some schools, such as those where Anne and Elin teach, contraception and STD prevention cannot be taught until the high school level. When Alison referenced being able to teach contraception education in seventh grade, Anne responded with envy.

Wow, I am envious...a school that has contraception education in 7th grade?...Many schools do let me talk about contraceptives to freshman, but certainly not to 7th and 8th grade. I'm really only able to talk about STIs and decision making [with them].

Notice that although there is a one year age difference between eighth and ninth grades, Anne is not allowed to discuss contraception education. She is able to discuss sexually transmitted infections with younger students, but not able to discuss how to prevent them. This may reflect the schools' assumption that abstinence is the norm for more students, and that the discussion is irrelevant, although the reason for this limitation by the district is not clear from the data.

Elin's environment is similar in attitude to Anne's. Elin references, however, that there is a job security issue with discussing condoms at the middle school level, and she is choosing to wait until she has tenure before she attempts this.

I show condoms at the 10th grade level. I usually have several activities planned, if I feel their maturity level can handle them, where students get to touch condoms and become more familiar with them in a non-threatening way. I've had students show how much a condom can stretch by putting pieces of fruit in them. We've conducted condom races in class where each group has to verbalize the steps of putting on a condom.... I would like to show condoms to my middle school classes, but my school has not warmed up to the idea yet. This may sound bad, but I'm waiting for tenure before I bring condoms into that class.

In Harry's school, he feels comfortable discussing contraceptives at the middle school level, although only in a theoretical way. He does not bring in any samples of props for students (e.g., a condom), although he does use drawings and diagrams.

I have covered contraception in a 7th/8th grade setting. Basically I ran through all the different types of contraception and talked about how each one was used and its effectiveness/pros/cons. I did not physically show a condom to them or have them watch any videos with the devices, but I did draw up diagrams on my Smartboard when necessary.

Alison appears to teach in the most inclusive district in the study, and her rural school district allows a full discussion of contraception at the middle school level.

I teach about abstinence and contraceptives in 7th grade. We discuss what sex really is. I discuss oral/anal sex as behaviors which can transmit diseases. I discuss the effects of alcohol and other drugs (AOD) on decision making. I demonstrate how to put a condom on correctly. I also have female condoms, birth control packs, Mirena IUD, diaphragms, spermicides, dental dams, vaginal rings, [and] the patch.

For those educators who float between schools or districts, it is not often clear what is permissible, and sometimes the educator must make a judgment call on whether to cover certain topics. However, Anne always covers the widest range of topics (although not always with explicit permission) when she teaches at the high school level.

I always do a condom demo, male and female. Many times I ask the school if I can do it, and other times I don't ask, just do it.

Although covering contraception does not directly tie to queer-inclusive education, what it does tie to is how far a school will allow educators to go when discussing sexuality. If a school district does not allow discussion of contraception, it is probable they will not discuss queer topics, either, since doing so implies students are sexually active. For schools which take an abstinence focus, sexuality in all forms is typically not discussed outside of the context of marriage, and with federal laws prohibiting gay marriage, there would appear to be no relevance to the discussion. The challenge for the educators in the study often became how to teach students to think critically about sexuality when certain topics were avoided, ranging from homosexuality to contraception.

Manny indicated he struggles with working specifically with rural students, due to deeply held religious beliefs of his rural students. These beliefs, in his opinion, discourage critical thinking, which he specifically correlates with the rural environment.

I found that working with rural students to get them to critically think and consider multiple points of view harder than any other place. These "rural" kids come to my classrooms with very deeply held beliefs from conservative Christianity and make it nearly impossible [for me] to get them to consider critically thinking or any form of intellectualism. I was, however, able to engage students through the use of popular culture and make the class interesting for them, but I had more of a difficult time getting

them to think outside the box in terms of gender performativity, gender codes, or policing of gender in dominant culture.

However Harry has found rural students' experience with agriculture to be helpful in the classroom, and views rural students' experiences as positive in teaching critical thinking about sexuality, since students have already been exposed at the reproductive level to many of the topics.

Well one interesting aspect of teaching in a rural area that has a fair amount of agriculture is that many of the students have sexual experience from working on a farm. NO, not them and the animals! Just them learning about anatomy and physiology through things like castration, birthing and mating of the animals. The students who work/ live on a farm with animals (many of which are involved with 4H) almost always have a better understanding of sex and this was something I definitely did not anticipate when I started teaching about sex.

As can be seen above, the communities of engagement with which a student has contact can greatly influence the teaching of queer-inclusive concepts. The sociocultural constructs of these communities may help or hinder the creation of an environment where queer issues can be discussed openly and honestly. To overcome, or enhance, these community beliefs, the teacher has a bit more control over her classroom, and hence we move from the macro level of communities to the more micro level of classroom community.

### **Classroom communities**

Classroom communities represent the world inhabited and shaped by a teacher and her students, typically a literal classroom. Although, of course, other larger communities influence the classroom, teachers and students have much more control over shaping the classroom environment. When teachers do not have control over their environments, such as the situation Tina faced in a classroom where she was doing a one-time workshop, the classroom can be a

rather negative space, for both the teacher and the students. Tina refers, below, to an incident where she was treated very rudely by students in a class, and how she tried to take control. It's also interesting to note how some of Tina's own stereotypes about the students she was teaching emerged in her narrative, and how the story could be perceived as condescending

Now, I have never been spoken to that way, ever. I went over ground rules, too, which they ignored. I asked for the teacher to be in the room during class, he was late. When I continued the program after the comment and the teacher was back in the room he laughed at some of the foul, sexist things said. I'm sure he was brought up the same way, but the new principal who was a fantastic woman wanted HIM to clean up his class and I was the 'answer'. Then me telling them that the 'That's gay' and 'Faggot' comments they were making to one another was hurtful to everyone around was really just seen as fluff to them all. It's a town where working at a factory or garage or being a farmer was your life. If not, you were pregnant and using food stamps or in the cosmetology program. The women I talked to in that program were very into what I had to say about contraceptives. That was the only class I liked. I have not been back since as I do not care to be talked to in such a way and my educational programs were falling on deaf ears. Again, I'm not required to be there. My services are free of charge. I can leave or not go at any time.

As can be seen above, ground rules become critical. In addition, educators located in one school, where they see students regularly and have more control, indicated that they can rely more readily on shared school values. Christi, who is in one school, discussed this with Tina, who is in multiple schools, and like other one-school educators, she indicates she runs into less homophobia in general than Tina.

I approach things much like Tina does. However I rarely have a homophobic slur shouted out at the [high school] level. I'm sure some think it but by in large they are respectful enough not to shout out something like Tina is referring to.

These classroom communities, however, even in inclusive school environments, are still viewed as little havens of safety in the larger, more challenging surrounding community environments. Delta, Christi, Elin, Manny, and Tina all commented they knew LGBT students who did not come out while in school because of community challenges, but waited until they left the area. Delta commented that “the kids would never come out in our district until they left the area,” reiterating that even with the safety and tolerance in classroom environments, these

attitudes do not flow to the larger communities in a way in who LGBT students feel comfortable coming out publicly. Manny, Anne, Carol, Delta, Elin, and Tina all indicated that these classroom environments are the only environments where LGBT students feel they can turn for help, and must remain closeted everywhere else for safety.

At the heart of inclusivity within these varied communities of engagement for the sex educators in the study lay solid classroom community management techniques. These techniques helped educators combat resistance, justify their work at times, but mainly created an atmosphere they felt was most conducive to discussing sexuality fully. Some educators handled classroom management upfront, through a series of rules which are made very clear through discussion or in writing. One educator includes a written contract in his syllabus, which students must sign in relation to acceptable behavior. This particular educator has also used this contract as a form of protection as well as a way of reminding students of their commitment to the classroom.

Manny believes that an inclusive classroom must begin with an inclusive pedagogy.

My own philosophy makes the claim that teaching from a queer pedagogy is for everyone because it does critically look at forms of normalcy in society, and the globe, including sexual ones. Of course, not every norm is up for transgression (i.e., murder it not normal, and it should remain that way), but [only] certain forms of normalcy that oppress others. So, this allows me in my classes to address the ethics of queering the classroom. My pedagogy is also very much placed upon the classroom table for discussion with my students--I lay out the politics of everything in my classes and open up discussion and room for critique. Such honesty has a transformative effect on the students.

Alison, Delta, and Tina, however, lay out ground rules at the start of each class, as Tina elaborates in the example below.

There are always ground rules....[I]n a one shot program the ground rules are put out at the beginning stating that in every classroom, in every school, each student has the right to be themselves. Everyone has an opinion and everyone has the right to feel safe as well as have an opinionated voice as long as it does not harm anyone in the classroom. This becomes tricky at times not only with LGBT issues but hot topics like abortion and contraceptives as well. I let them know that I am there to give accurate information, not sway opinions or tell them how to live their lives. But, if in the case that I hear something that could be hurtful to another I do call them out on it. I have had many students thank me for doing that after class because it let them know that I was someone they could trust

and who would listen to them afterwards. I've only had a handful 'come out' during a program, but many many many stay after to talk to me because I was a 'safe and trusted' adult who is non-judgmental. Such a great feeling! Though definitely scary at times, too, to hear the things they are going through.

Tina's reference to a "one shot program" above is indicative of her role as a sex educator who serves many schools across an area. This limited class time often requires these rules to be communicated quickly and efficiently. For educators whose work is typically in one school or district, however, it is easier for them to fall back on community standards. For both Alison and Delta, students understand what is acceptable in their school, so enforcement often becomes a non-issue. In Alison's case, she indicates she does not hear non-inclusive language.

Throughout my health course the students know that it isn't acceptable to put down others. We have a diverse population and therefore diversity and tolerance has been taught to our students in all curricula. We have many openly gay students and a few will bring their same sex partner to the prom. I don't see or hear of any put downs.

In contrast, Delta's policy focuses on manners and kindness instead of acceptance.

My students know they are accepted by me and our classroom "manners" by everyone. I have never needed to specifically set up "acceptance" for LGBT students. We have a classroom policy of kindness to all and it works.

Interestingly, multiple female participants (Alison, Delta, and Tina, who also all work in NY) but no male participants, indicated inclusivity toward queer students is shown via inclusivity toward all people and a pedagogical style which emphasizes openness and allows for a true sharing of knowledge about healthy lifestyles of all kinds. Some educators did have background in feminism and feminist pedagogy, but, despite their differences, virtually all felt that openness was the key. An open environment is viewed as a safe environment. Manny highlighted how he had to change his teaching, or disguise it at times, based on the environment he was in, in order to remain inclusive.

The community college where I also teach, which is only a mere 20 minute drive from the...university campus and its rural environment, has completely impacted my ability to teach about sex education or sexual minorities. Last semester, I had to carefully disguise units in freshman composition that moved students toward understanding difference without explicitly telling them what I was doing.



Elin, who teaches middle and high school level health education, struggled with creating spaces for queer students in her first year of teaching.

I had been at my rural, conservative school for only one year and I was struggling with how to discuss homosexuality in my classroom. Because of my fear, I didn't include any lessons that discussed homosexuality. I made sure to use inclusive language and discourage any hate speech or hurtful language, but I definitely skirted around the topic. I am embarrassed [by] my behavior now and the one thing that made me change my curriculum was an experience with a student. I had been talking about teen suicide and the information I presented stated that LGBT students were at a high risk for suicide. It was mentioned quickly and I think I discussed the importance of supporting teens who are going through a difficult time, but that was it. At the end of the day, a student came to my classroom and asked if we could talk. He said he had two things to tell me about what we learned in class. The first was that he had been thinking about hurting himself. That came out quickly in our discussion. The second topic was not so easy for him to say. He asked me to get out the materials that we looked at in class and he pointed to the information about gay students. He told me he was gay and that he had only told one of his friends. We sat and talked for a long time. Luckily, his family and friends were extremely supportive and loving. I still remain very close to this student and I'm so proud of him for the person he has become. I think of this student when I am teaching and I realize it is my responsibility to make sure all students know that I care for them and that I support them. Since this experience, I incorporated lessons that deal specifically with GLBT issues. I don't feel like I have a good handle on these lessons yet, but anytime I feel anxious or question whether I teach them or not, I think of that student.

Interestingly, all male participants, along with two female participants (Tina and Anne), also commented that students are often uncomfortable discussing certain aspects of sexuality. As Elin's example above shows, educators may have this discomfort as well, as is seen with Elin's desire to create an open environment but her skipping over queer topics out of fear. Through her interaction with a queer student, and particularly when she learned the student may hurt himself, she realized her obligation to an open classroom.

Humor played a big role in how difficult topics were approached. Anne felt humor to be critical in creating a comfortable environment for all students.

I personally feel that when teaching about sexuality education, humor plays a huge role...I add a ton of humor to my presentations; in fact, sometimes I feel like a stand-up comedian.....Humor is a great way to help people become more comfortable with a very uncomfortable topic. I had the pleasure of seeing River Huston a few years ago...She is a

comedian who is HIV positive and her whole show is a class in sex ed. I have stolen a lot of her lines.....one of my favorites is something I use in talking to women about their vulvas. I encourage them to look at their vulvas, get a mirror and a flashlight and check out what they have. River says on this subject..."If I had a wall full of pictures of penis', guys would be able to pick out which one is theirs, because they check themselves out, several times a day, but if I had a wall full of vulvas, women wouldn't be able to tell which was theirs, because we never look at ourselves, we've been taught it's naughty and dirty, yet, guys get to do it all the time." Women love it and I don't know how many of them actually will look, but humor brings normality to a tough topic.

Tina took this strategy one step further, using humor to emphasize safety.

Sometimes I do the joke, "So if some guy ever tells you he is just too big to wear a condom, he's a liar. Or part horse. Either way, don't have sex with him. If he's 'too big' for a condom he's too big to run, wear shorts, ride a bike...." and I go on to show how much a condom stretches and that it can be stretched over my elbow. Of course they ask me to do it which I usually say "no thanks, I don't feel like smelling like latex and strawberry lube today" and that gets a laugh as well. Which then leads into 'why are there flavored condoms?' [and] talk about safer oral sex. Which hits home to many after the STI [sexually transmitted infections]/herpes talk. Oh the faces I get after that one. Priceless.

Above, Tina utilizes humor to bridge the gap between personal safety (using a condom) and health (risk of sexually transmitted infections). This humor is not only used consistently in the classrooms but also carries over into discussions of queer students. She also utilizes a peer educators group to let her know when her humor goes too far.

I also advise a youth group through my job and they come up with many different entertaining but educational skits that use drama AND humor to the highest level to get their teen points across to other students. I run many things by them first to see if they think it's appropriate or too far, and I think they use some of my jokes while talking to others who come to them for advice, too.

Manny focuses on a particular type of humor, known as camp humor, in his classroom. The aim of camp humor is for fun, to make people laugh. "Camp humor is a system of laughing at one's incongruous position instead of crying. That is, the humor does not cover up, it transforms" (Newton, 2006, p. 127). In Manny's classroom, which focuses on sexuality in the context of an English classroom, he uses humor to help untangle the challenges of inclusive language.

I might hear a heterosexist comment from a student, and rather than address that directly, I use camp humor to highlight its social construction.

In Tina's classroom, which is a more traditional health education environment than Manny's, she too uses humor, although not camp humor specifically, to address homophobic comments.

As for using humor when talking about sexuality, gender and attraction, I love when I get this "Ugh, I'm ok with gay guys as long as they don't hit on me" to which I respond "Oh, because you are the hottest guy on EARTH? And everyone who's gay will fall in love with you? Please!" They then see how silly that sounds or get kinda standoff-ish.

However, using humor is not always a safe approach with all groups. Harry has had some challenges with using humor with middle school students. In addition, he indicates he has sometimes been accused of using humor inappropriately when in fact he did not make any inappropriate jokes.

Humor is a tricky one at the middle school level. When I have taught at the high school level, it's a LITTLE easier...but in middle school the students are still too nervous about the topic to really make jokes about it. I find high school students are much more attuned to humor and can handle it better, especially juniors and seniors--who are much more like college students in their ability to process sexual information. I have not gotten in trouble with humor but I have had students make untrue accusations that I said inappropriate "humorous" things in a middle school class.

The irony in relation to humor is that the same educators who are working to create safe environments by being funny are sometimes putting their own job security at risk. The creation of safe environments, including humor as a means of creating an open environment, also led to a philosophical belief in the importance of students' having their questions answered.

In Elin's case, her local community influenced her comfort discussing queer issues in her classroom

I had been at my rural, conservative school for only one year and I was struggling with how to discuss homosexuality in my classroom. Because of my fear, I didn't include any lessons that discussed homosexuality. I made sure to use inclusive language and discourage any hate speech or hurtful language, but I definitely skirted around the topic. I am embarrassed by my behavior now and the one thing that made me change my curriculum was an experience with a student.

As is seen by Elin's comments above, the creation of a queer-inclusive classroom environment is not always easy for the sex educators in the study. However, by nature of being in this study, all the sex educators are committed to creating this environment in their classrooms. For many, the creation of this environment is reflected in a pedagogical strategy which acknowledges and answers all questions.

## Questions

The desire to answer questions is both a pedagogical strategy employed by the teachers in the study as well as a core value of all teachers in the study. This not only entails the literal answering of questions but also reflects an atmosphere which exists within the classroom, and hence viewed as within a teacher's control to a large extent. In some cases the teachers ask students questions to help them to think critically about sexuality as is the case with Tina's "What is sex?" query. For Tina, this question creates space for a queer-inclusive curriculum.

During my program on Abstinence I start with the question "What is sex? Who has a good definition?" This is very difficult for them at first as they are usually looking at me like I'm some sort of alien who SHOULD know. One or two usually raise their hands and say "It's whether you're female or male" or "Intercourse". To which I ask "What's intercourse?" This gets even more faces red but then one shouts out more times than not "Penis in vagina!" I ask if that's it. That's the only definition? Pretty boring stuff then for everyone to be talking about if it's just ONE definition! I ask 'What if there's no penis in the relationship? What if there's no vagina?' Sometimes it's blank stares, other times they understand what I'm getting at, that everyone has the right to have consensual sex and it's not just a male/female thing. We then go over a big list of cards that have many different sexual acts on them from hugging, to touching over clothes, to vaginal/oral/anal sex. They come up with on their own [definition of] what they think being abstinent is and what is not following abstinence. Sometimes I get a student or two (mostly males) who say "That's gross" or "Dude, that's so gay," which usually sets me off pretty quickly but I stop it just as quick and let them know that when I'm in the classroom everyone has the right to feel safe and be who they are. Any other type of negative attitude or putting others down will not be tolerated and if they can't handle that some people are LGBT then they can leave the room and head to the office and explain it there. I've only had that happen less than oh...5 times in my past 3 and a half years. Usually it's middle school or

lower grade high school males who feel the need to express themselves in such a negative way towards others.

Questions asked by students seem to be the place where educators feel “anything goes,” and because they have control over their classroom environment (for the most part), they really do answer any and all questions. In addition, inclusive language is important to all the teachers in the study, and intolerant language is universally unacceptable. In some cases the intolerance is viewed as a teachable moment, whereas in others it is just inappropriate and addressed immediately as such, as in the example given by Tina.

If I get a comment of ‘[Oh my god] that's gay' or 'Who does that? That means you're gay!' or something along those homophobic slurs I wait for the classroom to be quiet and say "Some people are gay. Some people are straight. Get over it.”

Although anonymity was often utilized as a tool for many sex educators in relation to asking questions, all male participants and three (Anne, Delta, and Tina) female participants felt gender played a large role in the approach an educator could take in the classroom. Harry references that although he does his best not to associate gender with handwriting with his anonymous note cards, he does make some assumptions.

The vast majority of questions in my classes are submitted by anonymous note cards. I do not expect students to ask specific questions during the teachings as I think that it can be awkward for everyone involved. And really, I don't want to know who the questions are coming from for a variety of legal and psychological reasons! Also, I try my best to answer EVERY question...and kids have the best questions in the world! (Is the penis a muscle or a bone?) So I can only make assumptions based on the handwriting (yes occasionally someone has very distinct handwriting) and from this I can say that I'm pretty sure my male students ask much more graphic sex questions. The girls tend to ask more questions related to their cycles/pregnancy and all the different things nobody has explained to them about their bodies and what happens during pregnancy.

In Delta’s classroom, males tend to dominate when asking questions, and typically only the “bolder females” ask questions. Tina expressed surprise at this, also referencing the “bold girls” who ask questions in her class.

That's strange about the men asking all the questions as I always get many very bold girls who ask millions of crazy questions! The men usually are quiet or the ones who say mean and disrespectful things around here.

As the conversation continued, it became even less clear whether there was truly a gender divide in question-asking in classrooms. Since many of the educators taught multiple ages of students, it is also unclear, if gender is relevant, if the age of the questioner should be correlated with the gender. In Anne's case, she believes the class is divided equally among gender lines when asking questions, but she is making assumptions based on handwriting from her question box as well.

For me, I'd say the conversation is pretty equal with both genders responding. I, too, have an anonymous question box and I get a wonderful variety of questions and I hate to stereotype here but, I usually think I can tell if a handwriting belongs to a girl or a guy (I know, I know, don't assume, but I do with handwriting!) and I get just as many from guys as girls.

All educators in this study felt students deserved to have their questions answered. For Anne, Elin, Manny, and Tina, this desire to answer any and all questions came from their own lived experiences, which often included limited or no information about sexuality. Manny discussed his own experiences coming out as a gay man in an unsupportive community.

I do what I do because first, I was closeted myself as a kid in Southern California. I also don't ever want anyone to ever experience what I did as a kid in terms of homophobia and racism. So, I want to give my students the tools with which to learn to be 'active citizens' in a democracy, instead of passive ones.

Tina indicates her sex education in school was also limited. However, she does remember references to intolerance of sexual minorities during the sex education classes she took in high school. When she got to college, she quickly realized how little her schooling had offered her in relation to sexuality, and this made her angry.

I always knew all this anger and fervor that I had would do me good some day. It was anger at the education I had received about sex and sexuality in high school. Really, there was NOTHING offered to us other than a video of a woman giving birth and one class on how 'Gay people get HIV so don't be gay'. Seriously, that was my class. Run by a very religious teacher who was a friend of our family.

Anne specifically references that her lack of comprehensive sex education was a driving force for her to teach about it.

I have done a lot of soul searching during this job and remember small things about my 'sex education' or lack thereof and have come to realize, how much I missed out on, by not having any formal comprehensive sexuality education.

Therefore, this desire to answer questions is personal. For three of the four educators who teach in multiple environments (Anne, Manny, and Tina), and one of the educators who teaches in one district only (Elin), they indicated they answer questions freely and openly. The challenge for school districts in general, however, is surprisingly not sexual minority issues. Frankly, for many schools it appears to be an "all or nothing" attitude – either a school is open to discussion regarding sexual minorities or does not allow it. Where the water gets muddy, though, is in relation to contraception (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 2009, 2007, 2003; Trenholm, Devaney, Forston, Quay, Wheeler, & Clark, 2007; Legal Momentum, 2007; Waxman, 2004; Pardini, 2002; Collins, Alagiri, & Summers, 2002; Landry, Kaeser, & Richards, 1999). The ultimate goal of answering and acknowledging all student questions is the desire to teach students to think critically about sexuality in all its forms.

### **Critical Thinking**

Teaching students to think critically about sexuality is really at the heart of all educators' teachings in the study. In order to think critically, students must be armed with correct and complete information, and hence the need for all questions to be answered in an open and inclusive classroom environment. There was an overall consensus that students need help making healthy decisions, and therefore the sex educator is obligated to provide this service. Those rural communities which were deemed more liberal were those whose residents had access to college,

either through community members or parents who went to college and came back, or those rural communities which were close to colleges and universities. It appeared to be generally believed that a college education creates a more liberal outlook, and more desire for inclusive sex education. However, those communities with college access were perceived as the minority of communities by the educators in the study.

In Anne's case, she has a group of students who serve as critical thinking mentors to other students for sexual health issues as well as advisors to her own teaching in relation to sexuality. The group does much through the years to build trust, but still the coming out process is challenging for LGBT students. She relates the story of one student who took years to come out, even though she reiterates that she is an ally and is open to any conversation.

After class, he approached me and said "Are you serious about never deserting someone, because they're gay? Well, I'm gay!" I almost cried I was so happy that he finally felt comfortable to tell me, but it took years and years. He told me that he was pretty sure from the start I'd be ok with it, but he was so scared to tell me. Even though he knew it would probably be ok, he still had this underlying fear that I would judge him and not treat him the same way. I am so happy for him that he finally has trusted someone, but so sad for him, that he feels he can't trust anyone else....I have put him in contact with a few statewide support groups, but he is too scared he might see someone there who knows him!

Contraception appears to be the area where abstinence education and values clarification become murky. Although contraceptives can be taught in a healthy living environment, focusing on sexually transmitted infection and pregnancy prevention, it is not appropriate in an abstinence-focused environment, for sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy should not (in theory) be relevant if a student is not sexually active. Despite differences in context, most school districts in which participants teach do allow discussion of contraceptives, with a wide range of what can be discussed or shown, but many schools place limits on the content of these discussions based off of student age. Elin has been frustrated by these limitations. She has experienced communities which expect teen pregnancy, and rather than allow her to provide information, the community limits her from teaching on contraception, and would rather deal with pregnancy.



All sex educators in the study wanted to help students to think critically about sexuality in all its forms. Critical thinking is defined as follows:

We understand critical thinking to be purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based. CT is essential as a tool of inquiry. As such, CT is a liberating force in education and a powerful resource in one's personal and civic life. While not synonymous with good thinking, CT is a pervasive and self-rectifying human phenomenon. The ideal critical thinker is habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit. Thus, educating good critical thinkers means working toward this ideal. It combines developing CT skills with nurturing those dispositions which consistently yield useful insights and which are the basis of a rational and democratic society (Facione, 1990, p. 2).

This effort often begins with inclusive language use, particularly in reference to creating an inclusive environment for sexual minorities. Much debate occurred in our focus group about the use of the term 'partner,' a term which some felt those in their school districts did not understand. Anne commented that even when others start using the term around her, they often cannot explain what the term means.

I am not sure people 'get it' when I say partner, instead of boy/girl friend. I know people hear me saying it because I then hear them using 'partner' instead, but I don't think they really stop and think about why I'm saying [it]. Of course, there are those who do get it and hopefully the world helps them feel included, but I really believe that the vast majority of the students that I talk to have no idea that I'm using that term to assure that someone doesn't feel left out of my discussion!

Tina concurred.

I say 'partner' all the time and even my husband does it and corrects people at his work. But many teachers and students just 'don't get it' either and think we're referring to a same sex partner instead of being equal and open to everyone.

In a classroom environment, however, inclusive language also becomes a teachable moment, and an activity related to critical thinking. Carol agreed with Anne and Tina, but she addresses this

issue in her classroom. For her, the use of the term partner is a part of the ground rules laid out at the beginning of class.

I agree that most don't 'get it.' I usually prep the class and explain why I will be using the term partner when I cover classroom ground rules before we begin.

However, sometimes in teaching sexuality education, teachers find themselves the recipient of a lesson in critical thinking, as Elin referenced in relation to her experience in being inclusive to sexual minorities in her classroom during her first year of teaching. She was hesitant to discuss queer issues in her class until a student came to her and told her he was gay and was considering suicide. This greatly impacted her future teaching.

To facilitate the critical thinking process, educators used activities to provoke a deeper level of thinking about defining key terms. This helps to create an inclusive environment for the students and help them reflect on terms they have previously "taken for granted." Anne starts all her classes with an activity called "What sexuality means to me."

One activity I do which is really simple is have large newsprint with the words "what sexuality means to me...." and have the students write on the newsprint and finish the sentence. I assure them that spelling doesn't count, nor does handwriting, and let them come up with the answers. Then, we discuss each and every answer. The answers (as you can guess) vary widely, everything from the f word, to "sexuality is a lifelong process that starts when we're born, and ends when we die" (and yes, I really had a student write that). Many of the answers are "sex", so we talk about how sexuality is so much more than just the act of genital stimulation. It's a great discussion that sometimes can last the entire class period!

Alison also engages the students in an activity about where they hear their messages about sexuality. This exercise, which Alison calls the "Milk activity / Mixed messages experiment", is used to help students think about how they learn their own values.

I have a clear glass bowl [into] which I add a quart of whole or 2% milk (you need the fat in the milk for it to work well). I leave it on a table in the front of the room. This allows any currents time to settle down. I then have 8 different food colors (4 regular & 4 neon). I explain that each color represents a different message:

1. You (blue)
2. Your parents (red)

3. Peers (green)
4. Teachers (yellow)
5. Religion (lime green)
6. Music (teal)
7. TV/Movies (pink)
8. Close friends (purple)

I carefully hand out the 8 food colors explaining that it will stain clothing/fingers. I have student volunteers walk up and state one message that the student gets from that source.

They then place ONE drop in the bowl. Colors need to be spaced out in the bowl. After we go through this twice (16 drops in the bowl) the students can see that each color is distinctly separated. I discuss ask "Who has your best interest at heart?" They respond they do, their parents, maybe religion. I ask who doesn't have their best interest and they will state music, TV, movies, peers. I state that their parents are a great source for their values, what behaviors are appropriate and which aren't. We discuss pre-marital sex, some parents are okay with this, and others aren't. We discussed unplanned pregnancy/HIV/STIs.

Now I hold up dish soap. I say this represents hormones. I explain that hormones can effect the brain. I then pour some dish soap into the milk and food coloring bowl. This causes the food coloring to begin blending together. I then add alcohol (rubbing/isopropyl alcohol) to the milk and it causes yet another neat reaction.

The colors now all blend together. We watch as the media may win out (just do it message), followed by religion (don't do it until marriage/ adult), then maybe the parents color takes over. Each time I do this the winning color varies. I discuss the mixed messages that AOD (alcohol & other drugs) cause. I discuss how alcohol impairs the ability to make healthy decisions. I again talk about who has your best interest and it's probably not Trojan. I then link the milk/mixed messages with what the media messages are. This is a fun way to discuss the effects of media on behavior.

Christi spends a good deal of time working with a group of peer educators in relation to critical thinking.

Our Peer Educators go through 20 hours of training after school. They have many lessons that stress the expression of sexuality through the "whole being." Youth leave these trainings with a deeper understanding of sexuality....In our classroom lessons we discuss values. Therefore understanding family, religious, community and personal values would be equally important for "any" person in the class regardless of background.

The rural sex educators who participated in this study teach in many different contexts, but they do possess some commonalities in approach for creating inclusive environments for queer students. Their first shared awareness is of the communities with

which they, and their students, engage on a sociocultural level, and the navigation of these communities with their own classrooms. They must recognize these external communities in order to create effective classrooms where all students, but in this case particularly queer students, are respected and valued. It is important to note that they all utilized openness towards all questions and a desire to have students think critically about sexuality as hallmarks of their pedagogy. Now it's vital to revisit the major research questions of this study to see how this all fits together.

### **Revisiting the research questions**

It was quite a challenge to separate out the four themes which emerged, as communities of engagement, classroom communities, questions, and critical thinking truly cannot exist without one another. In order to teach critical thinking, a teacher must answer student questions, and therefore must have a classroom environment with boundaries that allow her to do so. Sometimes this involves becoming a site of resistance to the broader community sociocultural constructs, and other times the larger constructs are an enhancement. For an environment to queer sex education however, the teachers in this study made it plain that awareness of these four themes was critical to inclusivity. In addition, desire to create a queer-inclusive classroom is not enough – an educator must themselves have information and knowledge which they may not have received through their schooling. Simultaneously, knowledge of queer topics is not necessarily helpful is one if not aware of sociocultural conditions. The educators in this study showed me that they recognize this balancing act – pushing the boundaries of how far they may go in a classroom, but in order to do so they must be aware of the boundaries. A queer-inclusive rural sex education

environment is one that is made by the teacher, and typically not in existence already. In the next chapter, I will discuss how these themes integrate into the larger research questions of the study.

## **Chapter 6**

### **DISCUSSION AND INTEGRATION**

The context and the theoretical framework of a study always need to be kept in mind when considering the results of the study. The primary purpose of this study was to examine rural sex educators' perspectives on how they create environments that are inclusive to queer students, but this must be examined in light of the theoretical framework of the study and the philosophies of the educators who teach sex education in rural environments. To this end, I begin in this section by integrating my experience as a researcher. In section two I explicitly answer my research questions. Section three integrates the answers to these questions within existing research. A fourth section shares the educators' own stories on how they got involved in teaching sex education, to help further break the silence of rural queerness. Finally, I discuss the implications of this study.

#### **Bottoms of Coffee Cups**

In many ways, undertaking this research has been about studying the bottom of coffee cups for me. I did this a lot throughout my work. I find some of my strongest inspiration comes from listening while gazing into a liquid blackness, listening while watching sugar swirl in cardboard, thinking while peering longingly into an empty cup. Throughout my research I have felt a constant sense of the isolation of doing an online study while trying to write an ethnodrama about queering sex education, and the absurdity of trying to determine a coding strategy for an ethnographic study which has no visuals to describe. To top it off, I developed a journal which was filled with rich description – of songs, of poetry, of lyrics – but not of any participants, because I had nothing with which to work and to write.

Let me begin by describing my coding process. In previous chapters, I discussed what I eventually did, but there was a lot to get to before this even happened. By about day two of my study, I realized that, in having an online focus group which allowed me the greatest access to the greatest number of rural sex educators, I had also created a problem for myself. I couldn't SEE anything. I have yet to hear of an a/r/tographer undertaking a research project without visuals. I quickly began to realize I needed something and I instinctively began to add it through my journal. My journal became one of two major outlets for my desire to create.

My second outlet became my support group, the peers with whom I had discussions regularly, with whom I shared data and writings and to whom I listened and bitched and absorbed. Over the course of the data collection period, I physically met with someone from my support group ten times. Sometimes we met in groups, sometimes alone, sometimes using technology. My support group, however, always insisted that meetings be face-to-face, even if this meant using a webcam, because they could read my stress level by my face. All times, however, it was required that coffee be involved. Therefore, even when we were virtually face-to-face (what an ironic phrase), we were all required to have cups of coffee. Sometimes I think they thought that I may not need advice, just caffeine. Incidentally, we did have discussion via email as well, seventeen times since the study launched to be exact, but this was typically only to review a piece of writing and not to discuss.

When the study began, it also became apparent I needed to have something to link to my sense-memory, since visuals were out. The only visual I ever saw was Figure 8.

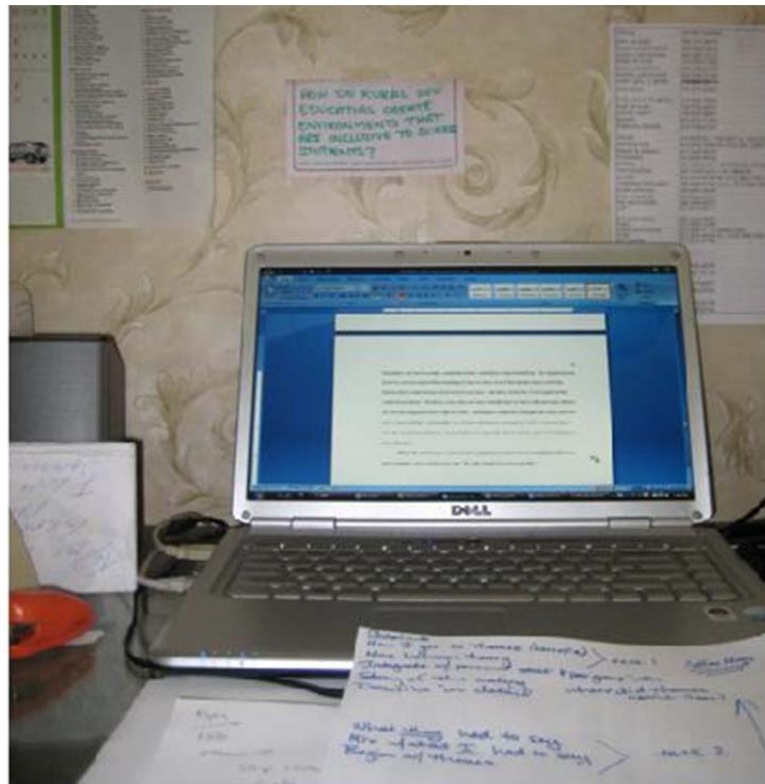


Figure 8 - A view from a desk

As an example, when I review my study journal, I see that my music on day one was Beth Orton singing “Ooh Child.” This instantly takes me back to the first day. What was I seeing? Exactly what you see in Figure One, which is almost exactly what I saw every day (with some minor paper shuffling). What did I do? Well, I can look to the right side of my journal and see what tasks I engaged in, easy enough. But what did I *feel*? Ah, I would have no concept of how to remember that without Orton’s song. “Ooh, child, things are going to get easier.” That transports me back to feeling overwhelmed with doubts that no one will ever log in, that I won’t be able to get enough data, and also the (later to be false) sense that this process will get easier as I get more accustomed to the pace.

So. Back to coffee cups and coding, which are inextricably linked. The tempo of the study did pick up as the days passed, and around day nine I started to want to talk, to share, to get



some other ideas. On day seven I wrote to my peers asking if anyone would be available to chat through what's happening so far, as I was struggling with managing the multiple discussions occurring simultaneously on the site. One of my beloved supporters took me up on the chance to chat, so we grabbed our requisite coffee cups and checked out the site together. I showed her my challenge with all the various conversations, and she offered me some ideas about how to make my participants feel valued while also making me feel less overwhelmed. To be honest, I don't even remember what we discussed, but I do remember feeling less alone and really enjoying having someone to drink coffee with.

Jumping ahead a few days, the data collection period ended, and I now had to figure out how to transcribe off of a website. This seems like a pretty straightforward thing. It isn't. Formatting gets strange in various software packages, like everything having unchangeable line breaks when a cut and paste was done into Excel, but then having super-long unmanageable paragraphs in tiny font when inserted into Word. I had data set transcriptions in every format available to me on my laptop – Word, Excel, and even Notepad – trying to find a good format. Oh, and then there was my decision to use NVivo.

NVivo is a product use for coding qualitative transcripts. It seemed like an easy way to manage data, and I decided, for no apparent reason, to utilize this software with which I had no experience. I am pretty techy, so I thought this would be easy. It wasn't. First, take a novice researcher like myself, throw her into a piece of software she does not know, and frustrate her with trying to find a format which is flexible enough to use in NVivo, and you will end up with a lot of wasted time. I wasted almost a month trying to figure this out. It was only when I got together with one of my support groupies that she said, "Why are you doing this to yourself? Why not use something like this..." – hands me an article - "to use tools you already have on your computer." This is when I discovered LaPelle (2004) and her practical, smart information on coding using common computing tools. That was a good coffee day.

I spent a month, literally, playing with the data set. No, not coding but rather messing with formats. I struggled with how to approach coding, because an online focus group is not a linear experience. What I found is that participants would typically log in once a day, do a bunch of different tasks, and then log out. I did not anticipate so much multitasking. At one point, there were multiple questions posed by me still open (i.e. ongoing), and participants were responding to them, then to each other, then posing new questions, and not always in that order. Honestly, the level of commitment from the participants was overwhelming, because wading through all the data was hard work on their part. I wasn't certain whether to analyze the transcripts by looking at each question, or the time the participant responded, or by each participant individually, and all posed challenges. If I just looked at each question, I missed the richness participants provided when they jumped in and out of different topics on the site, often bringing comments from one topic into another. If I analyzed responses in sequential order, I missed the conversations that emerged within questions, because typically one participant would jump in and answer multiple questions at once, thereby giving me a cluster of answers for a participant. If I looked at participants individually, I missed the interaction between them, and the questions posed by them to one another became lost in the coding process. Therefore, I ended up with six different sets of data, sorting on various iterations of the above as I sought a way that allowed me to look across questions, sequence, and individuals. And I called in my coffee crew.

On this day, I brought all six formats to them and said help. Fortunately, this meeting took place within easy reach of multiple cups of coffee. I also brought LaPelle's (2004) article with me, and we were able to figure out how to structure the transcripts so I could work with each. First, we rejected any transcript that was not easily sortable, so Notepad was out. I also had a version that was truly only sortable by question, and this was rejected because so much of the beauty of the data came in the interaction among participants. That approach was gone, just like my first cup of coffee. Anything in Excel was found to be painful to manipulate and still use

without having to make the font microscopic, so that was dismissed. I was left with Word, and eventually with a column for participant ID, the participant comment, and first-level coding (see Chapter 4). Three cups of coffee down and I felt I could begin coding.

I then went into a solo coffee period, where I drank alone. I spent the next month deep in a four-cycle coding process, as mentioned in Chapter 3. Through experiencing the data in its many iterations, I ended up adding columns for question number, date, and time, so I could look across the 150 plus pages of data as dynamically as possible. I also did end up using Excel a bit, as I pulled the data into a spreadsheet with tabs for each question for quick reference. This became invaluable as coding commenced so I did not lose context for comments.

I also faced a challenge with coding. My intent had been to utilize Saldana's (2009) dramaturgical coding methodology, which is typically used in ethnotheatre. However, this quickly became impossible with the type of data I had. Dramaturgical coding involved coding in six areas: objectives (OBJ), motives in the form of action verbs; conflicts (CON) – obstacles confronted by the participants which prevent her from achieving her objectives; tactics (TAC) – participant strategies to deal with conflicts and to achieve her objectives; attitudes (ATT) – participant attitudes toward the setting; emotions (EMO) – emotions experienced by the participant; and subtexts (SUB) – unspoken thoughts (Saldana, 2009). All of this is partnered with environmental field notes, dress of participants, and artifacts utilized to assist with scenery, costumes, and props. However, I had no ability to see anything visible, and I felt very uncomfortable coding using this methodology when the only communication I had was written, as online communications can often be misinterpreted when trying to determine such complex items such as emotions and subtexts. Therefore, I decided to use the simplest coding method that was feasible, to offer maximum flexibility for future ethnodrama development.

I utilized a combination of in vivo and descriptive coding, attempting to retain participant voices as often as possible. However, since all of the data were in written form, in vivo coding

was easy for first-cycle coding. In vivo coding refers to a word or phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record (Saldana, 2009). Therefore, the passage “I teach health. In my classes and in my school sexual minorities are treated like other minorities they are treated like everyone else, an equal. The district and my classes teach tolerance and diversity” became “Sexual minorities are like everyone else,” in my first-cycle coding scheme. This initial coding resulted in 114 codes, and became quite overwhelming. I knew it was time to call in my peers for some serious coffee talk to help me focus.

After a pretty intense coffee session (resulting in 3 cups devoured by me), I worked with my peer support group to determine where to go from here. What I thought would be easy, utilizing in vivo coding, turned out to be more challenging than I thought, since written text does not allow for vocal emphasis, and I was concerned about misconstruing meaning without visual and audible cues. I reviewed my coding choices with my peers, and they recommended I do a second-cycle coding using descriptive coding to help focus the topics, so I set to work on my own to attempt to utilize this method.

I found descriptive coding to be much easier, once I got started, particularly for moving into third-cycle coding. I spent a week extrapolating my data into a descriptive format. With this, I was able to create a numeric tracking system via a codebook. This effort brought me to 43 codes total, and so a phrase that was previously “Sexual minorities are like everyone else” was now coded under the heading “Normalcy.” For third- and fourth-tier coding, I utilized pattern coding to pull together the data into more meaningful units of analysis. Eventually, themes began to emerge. This got me in an optimal range (somewhere between five to seven) of five themes (Saldana, 2009; Lichtman, 2006): classroom management, classroom activities, critical thinking skills, handling questions, and communities engagement.

Before proceeding, however, I wanted to be sure I had handled my data appropriately, so I did a bit of reading, and called together my groupies. This also turned into a pretty big meeting,

with a thorough review of my coding to date, some slight revisions to terminology (for example, changing “community engagement” to “communities engagement” to reflect the multiple communities represented in the data), a re-sort of the data to look at it in utterance order, a short but critical review of qualitative coding techniques (to help refresh my memory and also inform my peer group, not all of whom were experienced with these types of coding), and then a final thumbs up was given on the data. I also did a code frequency analysis, at the urging of my peers, to get a sense of how often codes were used, to ensure my larger themes were viable. I left feeling invigorated to really start picking through the data to find quotes that stuck with me. I found 43 quotes that I felt reinforced the themes, and realized quickly that this was way too general, so I began the process of selecting quotes which more explicitly reinforced the ideas presented.

I also thought this was a good time to talk with my advisor to review where I was to date, and to get his feedback. I sent him a few things, and he asked me, as concisely as possible, to answer my big question – “How do rural sex educators create environments that are inclusive to queer students?” – by submitting one paragraph answers to the five key questions I used to structure the online focus group. I submitted this to him, and he offered some feedback as I began to work on writing this all up.

However, I was overwhelmed and stuck, and I realized some communal coffee was needed, so I got together for a work session with my colleagues. I reviewed the quotes with them along with the answers to my big question that I submitted to my advisor, and then they helped to focus me on outlining my approach. The outline helped enormously as I was working, for as I completed a section I highlighted it in yellow on the outline to show it was completed. This not only allowed me to jump around a bit as I wrote, but it also gave me a sense of accomplishment to see the page turn yellow. It also reminded me to focus on my participants as people, and not as a set of words to be coded. Having spent months focusing on data, I needed to revisit the people

behind the data, so I reread my participants' thoughts a few times, sometimes sorting them by person, sometimes by question, and finally in utterance order. This shift in focus came over a coffee shop discussion with my peers where I was talking about coding techniques and writing techniques. My peers encouraged me to get back into the participants themselves, because I seemed to be caught up in technique and needed to remember the people involved. It was a good lesson for me to learn, and it also was quite helpful to reread my transcript. It's a technique I continue to utilize whenever I feel disconnected from the data.

From that point forward, I was immersed in writing. I bounced between chapters, writing as I was inspired, often struggling, and consistently relying on my peer group for caffeine rushes, honest feedback, and moral support. We revisited my data set numerous times to check for accuracy in analysis while chugging soy mochas, and my peers even went so far as to request copies of my reference list for their own edification, since they were now so immersed in my project. Honestly, I could not have done it without them. They liked my study journal and inspired me to write this poem, which they loved, so I include it here in their honor.

*My friends are like flowers,*

*Maybe roses but maybe dandelions*

*Cantankerous caffeinated weeds that help my pages yellow.*

*Or forget about that, and I think I'll make them birds,*

*Flying, soaring, wise, above me, able to shit on my head*

*Part of my heart the continues to beat for me*

*Not alive without them.*

So where did all this get me? Closer to answering my research questions, which I address in the next section.

### **Answering my research questions**

The purpose of this study, which was informed by queer theory and performance ethnography, was to explore how rural sex educators create environments that are inclusive to queer students. The primary research questions include:

1. What programs and practices currently exist in rural environments which queer sex education?
2. What are the lived experiences of rural teachers who are – or are attempting to – queering sex education, and how can this inform practice?

In order to have a fuller understanding of the context of these lived experiences, two secondary questions also guide the study. These include “How do rural sex educators create environments which are inclusive to queer students?” and “How do rural sex educators queer narrowly-defined concepts within sex education, such as abstinence, in ways that make them more inclusive?” To this end, nine rural sex educators from throughout the United State participated in this research.

In the previous chapter, the key themes which emerged from the online focus group were presented to help share the stories of the participants and introduce you to the collective concerns of the group. The purpose of ethnography is primarily to describe or interpret the understandings of a group in relation to human affairs (Chambers, 2000). Therefore I wanted you to hear the voices of my participants as well as drawing some conclusions across the data and relate it to the literature which informed this study. Toward that end, in this chapter I discuss some themes that emerged across the data in order to provide a deeper analysis and to draw some conclusions in light of the literature. As a performance ethnographer, the beauty of this is in the narratives and

voices of the participants, so I highlight them frequently within this chapter. The themes of the study will also be discussed within relation to the literature that informs the study,

### **Existing programs and practices**

The first question was what programs and practices currently exist in rural environments which queer sex education. The educators in the study made it clear that each of them believes she queers sex education in some way, but many of the questions which emerged became more basic than mere existence. They provided many examples of how one school district's approach varied wildly from another's, ranging from what could be discussed to the existence of a permanent sex educator in the district.

Implied through all of this is what a community officially allows to be taught in a sex education classroom is that which the community (and I mean this term at many levels) finds to be philosophically within the constraints of "normalcy" (Rasmussen, Rofes, & Talburt, 2004; Campos, 2002; Irvine, 2002; Moran, 2000; Warner, 1999; Wolfensberger, 1972). Educators in the study were aware of this community norming and used creative approaches to queering sex education when it was not within the normalcy boundaries of a community. I found the educators to be extremely smart in navigating the politics of communities, and the ability to queer varied by the relationship an educator had to a district. For example, the educators who were brought in from external programs seemed to have more of a "do it and ask forgiveness later," whereas those who were in permanent district positions did not do this. All participants employed an open approach to answering questions, and felt justified in answering any question which a student posed, and this was often the justification for how educators "got away with" teaching topics that community did not specifically sanction.



A fortunate finding in relation to the programs and practices that exist is that there were quite a few rural districts in the study which were open to queering sex education, and therefore the educators often did not have to be as subversive as I assumed they would be. Many communities were quite supportive of inclusive sex education, and I found it impossible to develop quantitative metrics on this since almost half of the educators in the study taught for non-profits which were hired by school districts to teach sex education when no permanent educator was present. Those educators who were a permanent part of a school district seemed to be given more explicit permission to be inclusive, and also worked in schools which had policies which supported them (i.e. anti-bullying, respect for others, etc.). This was not always the case, but it did appear that permanent educators had more of a sense of what was allowable within the district. Not having this knowledge did not always stop those employed by non-profits from covering queer-inclusive topics, but it enabled permanent educators to do this without concern for future repercussions.

### **The lived experiences of the educators**

My second question focused on the lived experiences of rural teachers who are – or are attempting to – queering sex education, and how can this inform practice. The four themes which emerged from the data – communities of engagement, classroom communities, answering questions, and teaching critical thinking – all speak to this question directly. All educators found it critical to either have an explicit set of classroom rules, or to be part of a school district which had these and truly enforced them. The format of these rules, when they were created by the teacher and not in place and enforced within a school, ranged from zero tolerance policies to contracts the students had to sign. The educators relied on these classroom rules to both “call

students out” on non-inclusive language or behavior as well as a means of protection when they were questioned on why certain topics or behaviors were encouraged in class.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, several educators were questioned, none with serious long-lasting repercussions (at least professionally, possibly personally) and having these in place protected them. These classroom rules were utilized not only with students but also administrators and parents. With parents in particular, educators often had to justify why their curricular materials were queer-inclusive, and these ground rules allowed educators to discuss the emphasis on empowering and healthy living with smart choices, versus the typical victim stance which is often present with queer youth (Gray, 2009; Rofes, 2005; Owens, 1998; Murray, 1998; Britzman, 1998, 1995; Youth Voices, 1996; Unks, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1995; Eaton, 1993). By empowering students, educators are both helping to reduce the numbers of queer youth who are victimized, through teaching awareness and critical thinking, and also dispel myths of Martyr-Target-Victim (Rofes, 2005) as the only alternative for queer youth.

Educators in the study focused on critical thinking in their classrooms, and sometimes out of the classrooms as can be seen from the interactions with parents mentioned above. Many shared personal stories, which will be shared later in this chapter, which forced them to think critically about their own sex educations in school, and led them to wanting to ensure today’s students received information they did not. Not one educator in the study indicated she always wanted to be a sex educator, and many still do not adopt this as their primary identities professionally, with some considering themselves health educators, science teachers, or English professor. This ties in to earlier discussions that it is still unclear exactly who is teaching sex education.

Stambach (1999) states that schools contribute to making queer students abnormal, and therefore schools must examine their own relationships to other social institutions, and the lived experiences of these educators affirmed this. Educators sometimes found it necessary to create

sanctuaries in their classrooms due to the external pressures from the communities with which students engaged beyond the boundaries of the classroom. In order to do so, as discussed above, it became critical for educators to have rules and structures in place which enabled them to provide accurate information to any and all questions asked, and an environment where students felt comfortable asking questions. All educators employed anonymous question boxes to help enable this, and leaned on the structures in place when they were challenged.

The lived experiences of these educators proved that they will be challenged, whether it is through community activists, religious leaders, parents, administrators, students, or other community constituents. Educators did not exist in a vacuum where they could ignore the sociocultural realities of their communities, particularly when they acknowledged that their students had to continue to exist in these communities, no matter how safe they made their classroom spaces. It was often mentioned that many students who either were queer-identified during school or came out as queer after graduating, were unable to do so in the rural environment due to community pressures. Therefore, the educators taught lessons in critical thinking which had to not only transcend their own classrooms but stay present with the students for years to come.

### **The creation of queer-inclusive environments for students**

My third question focused on how rural sex educators created environments which were inclusive to queer students. The educators in this study reinforced Dejean's (2001) idea that many educators are discontent with the status quo and actively work to overcome normalizing practices. As mentioned above, all educators in the study felt they must have a strong set of classroom structures in place in order to be queer-inclusive, and they displayed this openness pedagogically via a willingness to answer any question, which led students to think critically

about their own sexuality and the sexualities of those around them. Starting a sex education course with questions such as “What is sex?” often helped to destabilized concepts from the outset of the course.

It became apparent throughout the course of the study, however, that many educators had received very little education on queer issues, which affirms previous studies of sex education (Klein & Breck, 2010; Radcliffe & Mandeveille, 2007; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). This lack of consistent training in teachers makes it challenging to define what educators consider to be a “queer-inclusive” environment, since there are often no standards utilized. Of those in the study, five held teacher certification in either health education or science education, whereas those working for non-profits were teaching sex education in the schools but are not certified as teachers. This is not an indictment that those who are uncertified are less competent, but rather a comment that it is challenging to determine the level of training they have received. Conversely, with standards for science education and health education varying widely from state to state, it is unclear where certified teachers have received their training. What may be a queer-inclusive environment for one educator may not be for another. Clearly, further research is needed to determine both what these educators consider to be inclusive sex education environments as well as the level of training each has received (both formally and informally) to manage and create such an environment.

### **Queering narrowly-defined concepts**

My fourth question focused on how rural sex educators queer narrowly-defined concepts within sex education, such as abstinence, in ways that make them more inclusive. The results in this area were surprising to me, in that most of the educators did not indicate that changes in federal standards, like the narrow definition of abstinence and the subsequent funding for

abstinence-only education, forced them to change their teaching in any way. This appears to be because of the focus on answering all questions; if a teacher cannot specifically address a topic, but they have classroom structures in place which enable them to answer any question, she will find creative ways to enable students to ask questions so that they can address the topic.

Educators felt that in order to teach critical thinking, which fits in with the federal definition of abstinence-only education, they were obligated to provide accurate information to students and it was therefore necessary for them to answer.

Only one educator mentioned standards specifically, and she shared a copy of NY state sex education standards, which she helped to review. Teachers in general appeared much more concerned with local school and community standards, and public school teachers more so than those employed by non-profits. At various times through the study one educator would question another's choice of pedagogical method, and once SIECUS (the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the US) was mentioned as a resource for pedagogical techniques, but never in the context of standards.

This lack of attention to federal standards may have been due to the nature of this study, as participants were recruited specifically because they self-identified as queer-inclusive, and thus may have felt they were already "bucking the system." The focus on critical thinking by all educators in the study set the stage for questioning narrowly-defined concepts. Interestingly, asking questions such as "What is sex?" does not in any way negate the federal definition of abstinence education, because a loophole in this policy is that it defines abstinence very specifically but never once defines sex. In addition, with four of the participants not employed by a public secondary school district, these restrictions may be relevant but not attached to funding. It is interesting that districts within states that took federal abstinence-only funding, however, which includes all states in this study, could still utilize the services of organizations which are queer-inclusive, such as Planned Parenthood, as long as the educators focused on abstinence; but

without a definition of sex and the inclusion of anonymous questions, the educators of these non-profits often felt free to cover a much wider range of topics than those allowed within the definition.

At times there were educators who were told specifically not to discuss a topic, particularly those who worked for non-profits and were doing “one shot” teaching, but it appeared as if most were contracted to come in, teach sex education, and not provided with much guidance beyond that, thus following their own employer’s standards, which were always inclusive. For teachers permanently within a district, there appeared to be a bit more structure, typically because the educators had to negotiate parents, administrators, and community members more frequently. Again, the nature of this study involved teachers who were queer-inclusive and was certainly biased in that sense, but the permanent teachers did not indicate it was a matter of “do not cover this topic ever” within their districts but more frequently they were told “do not cover this topic until the students are in X grade.”

### **Framing these experiences within literature**

As discussed in chapters two and three, the primary lenses through which this work is viewed is in performance ethnography and queer theory. With queer students at the heart of this research, most of the theoretical underpinnings come from queer theory. However, this is all connected through various interdisciplinary intersections, like the normative experience of schooling (Warner, 1999; Irvine, 2002; Kumashiro, 2002), the uniqueness of rural America (Halberstam, 2003; Gray, 2009), and the Marty-Target-Victim literature proposed by Rofes (2004). Judith Butler (1990) in her pivotal queer theory text *Gender Trouble*, offers viewpoints on the reliance on “iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms” (p. 95), as that which is required to create a normalization of bodies, which is reiterated within the field of sex

education via the federal definition of abstinence education. In rural communities, however, these norms become more visible, as the fishbowl effect present in these environments makes adherence to norms, through iteration, scrutinized. According to Gray (2009), rural communities use appeals to sameness to minimize community stigma by not acknowledging that queerness exists in the community at all. However, this notion was not embraced by the educators in this study as one to which they espoused. Instead, the educators in this study encouraged learners and community members to engage in a respectful environment where difference is, at a minimum, tolerated.

Although sex education has recently taken a turn towards comprehensive sex education under President Obama, the conservative turn of the past twenty-plus years should not be underestimated. This has led to a normalization of youth sexuality which is specifically exclusive to queer students (Irvine, 2002). The abstinence-until-marriage movement has normalized acceptable sexual behavior, meaning sexual behavior within the context of marriage, and for those who do not or are unable to marry, their sexual behavior falls into the category of “abnormal.”

The educators in this study constantly challenge these normalizing standards. Warner (1999) critiques the assimilation politics of sexuality in the United States. He theorizes that queers will never assimilate into these cultural standards, and nor should this be the goal. By teaching students to think critically about sexuality, these educators, at a minimum, make students aware that these standards exist at all. Rather than engage students with the “politics of sexual shame” (Warner, 1999, p. viii), the educators embrace a stance that their classroom policies must never create a space where shame is a norm or acceptable. In many communities of engagement, the heterosexual majority attempt to relegate queers to extremely controlled spaces, or into spaces of invisibility, but each of these educators worked to dismantle negative external community influence at least within their classroom spaces. They questioned “sexual and gender identities as

stable categories with fixed meanings” (Rasmussen, 2004, p. 5). By asking questions such as “What is sex?” the educators begin dismantling these categories.

Campos (2002) and Moran (2000) stand firmly on the side of comprehensive sex education as the only way to encourage critical thinking skills in students, and the educators in this study also follow these comprehensive standards. Unlike abstinence education, where discussion of sex before marriage is deemed inappropriate, comprehensive education is inclusive to abstinence alongside healthy sexual expression. In order to be queer inclusive, it would be impossible for the educators in this study to follow an abstinence-only curriculum, for only one educator works in a state where queer-identified persons can legally marry.

The imprecision of these normalizing concepts make sex education curricular interventions assumptive regarding queer students and how sexuality is categorized (Irvine, 1995). Teaching in a queer-inclusive manner requires educators to challenge an essentialist perspective on sexuality, with emphasis on natural, fixed, and innate sexual identities, and instead embrace a constructionist approach, where identities are viewed as fluid, effected by society, and limited by cultural models (Jagose, 1996). The examples of the activities the educators used in their classrooms, whether this is the milk activity, the development of plays and theatre, or philosophical questions about sexuality, indicate they utilize a constructionist approach which helps to facilitate queer inclusivity. A queer constructionist perspective believes sexuality is culturally dependent, relative, and not objective (Stein, 1992). Identity passes beyond empirical categories but instead into a self-identification process (Jagose, 1996). With this in mind, I would also like to note that I believe only one educator in the study, Manny, moved beyond the homonormative boundaries of gay/straight in their queer inclusivity, and this may be because he teaches at the postsecondary level. In order for this to happen, the educators in the study still need to continue discussion of how groups are privileged and how these privileges are maintained (Kumashiro, 2002).



Understanding the oppressions these educators feel from their larger communities of engagement requires moving beyond a discussion of homophobia and into how larger concepts of normalcy continue to oppress queer students (Britzman, 1998). The educators in this study were taking the first steps in moving beyond these oppressions by creating inclusive classroom spaces, but further steps are needed to help remove oppressive structures from larger communities of engagement (Kumashiro, 2002; Gramsci, 1971; Althusser, 1971). However, the importance of these classroom spaces cannot be ignored, for, according to Kumashiro (2001), students typically come to school with two types of knowledge about being queer – either incomplete or biased. Conquering these incomplete or biased knowledge sets in students, through challenging us/them attitudes, is an important first step in creating queer-inclusive schools (Kumashiro, 2001; Ellsworth, 1997; Felman & Lamb, 2001). In the words of Corber and Valocchi (2003), “the institutional regulation of [queer] forms of identity also suggests on some level the dominant society recognizes that there is no natural relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality and this it must vigorously enforce the belief that there is” (p. 9). These educators’ classrooms allow queer students to begin to explore roles different than those which are deemed “socially acceptable” (Gee, 1996).

Irvine’s (1995) five-step methodology for educators to become more queer-inclusive includes encouraging educators to acknowledge discomfort regarding queerness, obtaining knowledge of the patterns of heteronormative culture, obtain knowledge of non-heteronormative cultures, become aware of power inequities and the history of queer discrimination, and develop competency across queer culture by continually enhancing knowledge and showing respect for queer culture. The educators in this study had all taken the first step, and the remaining four were undertaken (both consciously and unconsciously) by various educators with differing degrees of success. For example, many educators included homosexuality in discussions, but did not delve into why this is often considered taboo, or go much beyond a homonormative curriculum. This

being said, some educators did go beyond these borders, and with self-reported success, so it is not outside the realm of possibility that educators could do this in their classrooms.

Studies have shown that sex educators often feel unprepared to teach queer topics (Summerfield, 2001), and teachers in this study reflected this. Irvine (1995) recommends a social constructionist approach in sex education teacher training programs, which acknowledges sexual identities as necessary fictions, thereby recognizing these categories exist but that they do not tell us much about an individual or her behaviors. All the educators in the study expressed, at various points, their concerns about students engaging in healthy sexual behaviors, and thinking critically about these behaviors, and a social constructionist approach could fit very nicely within this approach. Kumashiro (2002) supports that teachers often begin their search for sexuality information out of a need to create safe spaces for queer students, and all the educators in the study echoed this need and sentiment. The next step in this process is what Banks (1993) calls positionality, where identity is viewed as relational rather than essential.

Macintosh (2007) questioned how school could move from antihomophobic education and instead into queer education. Asher (2007) calls this deconstructing the mythic heterosexual norm and feels this needs to be brought to the forefront of a truly multiculturally sensitive education. In Vavrus' (2008) study of teachers, he worked with them to address issues of sexuality and gender in their classrooms and to consider appropriate pedagogical implications for their own learning, and he found that creating safe classrooms and safe schools required different skills. Classrooms required safety, open dialogue, and encouragement for respectful conversation, all of which were critical to the success of the educators in this study. For school safety, however, it required an audit culture which centered around social citizenship, and this was where the disconnect was often felt by educators in the schools. Many educators indicated that queer students did not know where to find teacher/administrator allies beyond their classrooms, even if the teacher herself was aware of other allies. In addition, it would be

impossible for educators who are “shipped in” for one shot sexuality classes to develop an audit culture at a school. An audit culture within a school implies all teachers are part of creating a safe environment, and this was often not the case for the teachers in the study. Beyond the classroom, Robinson and Ferfolo (2007) recommend a school can become a place of safety for queers by addressing discrimination towards queer relationships, disrupting heteronormative discourse, and providing alternatives beyond heterosexuality. One teacher did mention schoolwide queer-positive activities in her school, and one school did have support services specifically for queer students, but beyond that it appeared most support occurred either in the educators’ classrooms or through referrals to outside agencies and resources.

Rural America does not often have a history of inclusivity for queer students (Gray, 2009), and queer issues in rural schools get very limited attention in research (Whitlock, 2009; Halberstam, 2003; Corber & Valocchi, 2003; Bell, 2000). Most national organizations believe local issues are best handled at the community level, but local rural communities often do not have enough of a power base as well as financial resources to fight school districts (Gray, 2009; Miceli, 2005; ACLU, 2003). Often, when a battle is fought it is on an emotional level and focuses on queers along the Martyr-Target-Victim continuum (Rofes, 2004). This study hopes to share the stories of educators working to create queer spaces in their rural communities in order to further understand the complexities of rural queer life, which is necessary to address this silence (Halberstam, 2003).

### **Where we go from here**

So what does all this suggest for the theory and practice of creating queer-inclusive sex education in rural environments? And what does this suggest for future research? This closing section of the chapter explores these issues in greater depth.

### **Sex Education Theory and Practice**

There are some sex education scholars who have discussed issues related to queer students, and some scholars who focus on the challenges and opportunities of rural environments, but very few have focused on both of these areas simultaneously. Pinar's (1998) work regarding further exploration of queer-inclusive sex education in a rural environment recognized the metropolitan bias in sex education, and offered a road map which can be followed here as well. First, scholars and practitioners must begin by acknowledging the need for understanding all forms of queerness, including those outside of metropolitan areas, and empirically acknowledge the lack of rural voices that have shaped so much of contemporary queer theory. From there, describe the ways in which not only queer but also non-queer lives are created and maintained in rural environments, always recognizing that sexuality is both imposed upon as well as shaped by rural environments. With this description, one can then begin to theorize how queer lives in rural environments disrupt current concepts of rurality and sexuality as well as how this disruption is made visible.

I must add that one of the challenges that remained pervasive throughout the study, and is reflected in the literature, is the concept of queer students having to leave the area when they want to be open about their queerness. This was disconcerting to me as a rural queer myself, and has given me pause as I have reflected on the implications of this study. Despite their many differences, virtually all of the teachers in the study focus on normative policies of behavior that it often left me wondering if these classrooms were also sights of oppression for queer students,

although certainly an attempt to be inclusive. In the process of creating a normalized views of multiple sexualities, is this not un-queering the queer student? Do classroom rules and policies, which serve to normalize, end up tampering reality, for the fact is that the majority of teachers across a variety of contexts still do not believe coming out in their environments is safe or welcome for their students?

Through this study I hope to give guidelines for future directions in sex education in rural environments that are queer-inclusive, and I am hopeful that this study will also help inform practice generally. I hope educators, administrators, scholars, and community members can utilize this work to make efforts to create environments which are inclusive to queer, rural students. In fact, I hope this also helps queer students feel comfortable navigating rural environments and having these environments be an option to make a life, if they so choose.

All schools benefit from inclusive classroom and community practices. Hence it would be beneficial for educators and administrators in rural environments to pay attention to queer issues in the sex education classroom specifically, and in their schools in general. More importantly, the field of sex education can benefit from instruction for sex educators in queer issues. To a certain extent, this study has focused on the challenges in the classroom, but I am hopeful that the triumphs are obvious to the reader as well. Rural sex educators' stories reflect their desire to create inclusive communities, sometimes successfully and other times not, and their own struggles with determining how to create inclusive environments. As mentioned by virtually all of the educators in the study, despite teaching across very different environments, the environment of a school is deeply shaped by the administrators within it.

Rural sex educators' understandings of queer-inclusive sex education were often quite different than previous urban queer-inclusive sex education studies, particularly with how they addressed topics they were "forbidden" to discussion, like queer topics. In most sex education literature, with metropolitan bias, the focus is on reducing bullying, whereas this study reflected

teachers' desires to reduce silence. Teachers in this study were creative in how they engaged students, and sometimes were harmed by these creative techniques, including nasty letters, being accused of making inappropriate jokes, rude classroom behavior, and derisive behavior from other teachers, to name a few. However, 57% of all school districts are classified as rural (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007), so it becomes important to break the silences these teachers encounter, as a majority of educators in the United States are impacted by them. Feminist researchers have acknowledged the absence of certain groups, including queers and those who support queers, in much research, and this research attempts to bring queer issues to the forefront of the research (Madriz, 2000, p. 836).

So are these findings unique to the rural environment? I would argue that yes, they are. As highlighted earlier, rural school districts and communities face challenges which are unique when compared to urban and suburban districts and communities, and many of these factors were evident here. One of the first challenges facing rural school districts, in comparison to rural and urban, is their small size, which leads to the challenges the educators highlighted about the fishbowl effect of everyone knowing everyone else. Another uniquely rural challenge, which is somewhat obvious, is distance from an urban core and the resources typically available in these core areas, which could help educate teachers, students, and communities on queer issues; help advocate for resources and support when needed; and offer different normative visions of sexuality. In addition, another unique factor of schools is the tradition of local control, which for some educators meant most teachers and administrators in their districts were products of those areas. With these few examples, it becomes clear that the rural voice was evident throughout this study in a way that was unique and should be recognized as such.

## Recommendations

### *Who are these people?*

One of the greatest challenges faced during this study was determining who considers themselves a sex educator, and exactly what this means. Going into this study, I assumed that there would be primarily health and physical education teachers as participants, with potentially the occasional biology teacher. However, I could not have been more incorrect. The teachers in this study, all of whom met the study requirements of having taught sex education in a public school environment in the last five years, attempting to address queer issues in his classroom, teaching a minimum of fifteen hours of sex education specific instruction, and working with rural students, were from extraordinarily varied backgrounds. The participants were split almost evenly between those who were in one school district and those who taught in multiple districts. Most were employed by a school district, a few were employed by non-profit organizations, and one was employed by multiple colleges. Some called themselves health educators, others sex educators, one a science educator, and another taught English. Yet they were all tasked with teaching sex education. All had access to students in the public schools, yet the training, certification, and experiences of these educators varied widely. In addition, with the rural participants in this study spread across multiple states, certification standards varied widely. Until we are able to understand who is teaching students sex education, and the training they have (or not), it is nearly impossible to develop queer-inclusive curricula that will be utilized consistently from state to state, let alone from school to school within a district. I recommend that the field of sex education be examined for standards for queer-inclusive education, including the education these teachers need to comfortably teach these topics. In addition, I recommend

further evaluation of who is teaching sex education be examined to provide consistency across standards for educators.

### **Guidelines for inclusive environments**

Many creative and innovative strategies were utilized by the educators in the study to create queer-inclusive environments. First, the majority of educators, across all the varied contexts in which they teach, had some kind of contract or printed set of rules which governed the classroom. This allowed for free and open conversation, and also gave the educator a leg to stand on when rules of respect or tolerance were challenged. Second, those educators who were successful in queering sex education often were able to do so due to the rules already in place within a school district. By utilizing these rules, educators now had two legs to stand on. I recommend that educators utilize these strategies to create inclusive environments. This not only allows for a true conversation between the students and the educator but also protects the teacher in times when a classroom-external factor (i.e. parent or administrator) has concerns. It is harder for these external factors to come into play when the rules are very clear related to inclusivity.

### **Communities and contexts**

Educators in rural communities utilize multiple strategies for navigating the many communities they inhabit. At one level is the rural community itself, a geographic location which has values and social contracts embedded into it. At another level is the school district, where the teachers navigate the rules and contracts managed by superintendents and school boards. At a smaller level is the school itself, where teachers navigate relationships with principals, parents, and students. Educators need assistance within all these levels of community in order to create



queer-inclusive classroom environments. It is important that these multiple levels be addressed, particularly in rural environments where the fishbowl effect is prevalent. Those educators who are managing multiple districts often faced great challenges in determining what is deemed appropriate in their classrooms by that environment, and sometimes a shift of school or town meant major curricular changes. Again, some standardization of inclusive classroom environments will help to ensure teachers are consistent in their inclusiveness.

### **Opportunities for anonymity**

Every teacher in the study utilized an anonymous question box format to allow students to ask embarrassing questions and also to open spaces for students to ask questions about topics the teachers themselves could not bring up. For example, virtually all teachers were not allowed to mention queer sexuality at some point in their teaching career, despite the different sites of teaching in which they all worked, but if a student asked a question that the philosophy of “all questions deserve an honest answer” was utilized. Educators in the study indicated that when they were questioned on why a topic was included, they could use this philosophy to justify discussing a taboo topic. These teachers would also lead students to questions at times so they could discuss these taboo topics. I have not seen these anonymous question boxes mentioned anywhere in literature as a classroom technique, and I am uncertain if this is only utilized in rural areas (although I doubt it). This anonymous question box opened dialogue in the classroom, and with a good classroom contract in place these classrooms became highly queer-inclusive. More research is needed on this anonymous question box technique. I would also like to point out, however, that developing standards for queer-inclusive sex education may take away the need for these boxes, as topics are discussed openly by well-informed teachers.

### **Teaching critical thinking through sexuality**

The educators in this study all felt strongly that creating a queer-inclusive sex education classroom involved engaging students in thinking critically about sexuality. They all want their students to make better decisions in all aspects of life, and to understand that intolerance comes from somewhere. The educators felt that to think critically about sexuality, it must be inclusive of queerness. This flies counter to the current legislation regarding abstinence education, where discussions of sexuality are compared to encouraging students to engage in sexual activity. Therefore, materials which are queer-inclusive and help students think critically about sexuality are needed for the educators working within this field.

### **Limitations of this study**

I would have liked a more geographically diverse group of participants, and I struggled with finding anyone to help. With the exception of Iowa, Hawaii, and Oregon, all the participants were from upstate New York. I currently reside in upstate New York, and so was able to reach out to local communities for assistance, which yielded participants. I did recruit nationally, but when hundreds of email had been sent for recruitment and did not yield anyone, I began true face-to-face recruitment, talking with local teachers and parents to see if they could help. In addition, some of the New York participants recruited other New York participants. A more effective means of recruiting would have been helpful and is an issue of concern with evaluating this study for generalizability.

I would also have liked more gender diversity in the participants. Of the nine participants, seven were female. All New York participants were female, and some of the recruiting assistance between New Yorkers may have yielded this. In addition, the two males in

the study were a lesson in contrasts themselves, as Manny was one of the most prolific contributors (although worked in a university setting so was quite unique from other participants) and Harry was one of the least prolific. I could not find statistics nationally to determine if the abundance of females reflected a national bias towards female sex educators. The lack of teacher certification in sex education, plus the variety of fields present in this study, made this nearly impossible to determine anyway.

Finally, there are two basic kinds of data generated by participants throughout the study. There is what I call “shared” data, which participants freely and openly shared with one another on the site. There is also what I would call “private” data, which participants sent to me, and only me, directly. I have used shared data freely throughout the preceding chapters, and I only utilized private data with participant permission. For example, some of the participant characteristics listed were not gleaned from shared data areas but rather from private data, and each participant reviewed her or his introduction to ensure comfort. Many edited this information, and others were fine with the introduction as is. There were private communications between participants and myself, typically when a participant had a problem, and if I utilize this information it is with participant consent. In addition, I indicate when an exchange was private throughout this document. Finally, I have data which I have generated, whether this is through logs, journals, or creative writings, and this will be shared throughout as well.

### **Topics for Future Research**

This study created space for understanding rural sex educators who work to create inclusive environments for queer students, yet it became apparent that there are many avenues for future research which need to be explored. First a deeper study of who is teaching sex education is needed. One of the limitations of this study was the range of educators who considered

themselves sex educators who all came from varied academic traditions. Studying just those who work for non-profits contracted by public schools or just state-certified health educators may change much of the perspectives shared here. Within state-certified teachers, understanding how the approach to sex education differs by discipline (for example, health educators, biologists, physical education, etc.) would add further information to the field of sex education in general.

A second area for future study is the development of classroom contracts specific to the sex education classroom. Understanding the rules of these contracts, and evaluating the language of these contracts, would help further understanding of how queer-inclusive sex educators set behavioral standards at the beginning of the class. Along with this comes the study of the anonymous question box technique, utilized by all educators in the study. I am curious how educators are able to “get away with” answering any questions, when regulations are so stringent state- and nation-wide. It would be interesting to study how this question box is used in classroom environments through participant observation.

Specifically within rural environments, sex educators navigate multiple levels of community when creating safe and inclusive environments. No research has been done to date to determine how educators determine what is acceptable in a community, whether this be a geographic space, a school district, or a school. It would be interesting to see how rural educators navigate these contexts and how they learn the “rules.”

Virtually all educators struggled to learn to be inclusive, despite differences in what, where, or who they taught, as they had no training in these areas, particularly queer issues. Research is needed on how these educators learn about these topics, and where they gather materials. This could lead to the development of queer-inclusive sex education materials which can be utilized in a variety of contexts. In addition, these materials could address issues specific to rural communities so that the 57% of educators teaching in these environments have access to the materials.

Finally, what is really needed is to hear from queer rural students. This study focused on the experiences of sex educators in rural environments, but hearing from rural queer students about how they perceive their sex education classes would be telling. It would be interesting to compare this with the voices of urban queer students to help develop better and more inclusive materials and strategies for classrooms.

## Chapter 7

### EPILOGUE

In looking at rural sex educators and how they create spaces for queer students, I have made use of queer theory, a/r/tography, and performance ethnography to establish without a doubt that there are educators who work actively to create spaces for queer students, and therefore for all students. There is a considerable amount of emotional involvement for me in the construction, appreciation, interpretation, and critique of this research, as a queer researcher myself. One of the hardest decisions I faced throughout was whether this dissertation should culminate in a performance piece, and it's a decision I'm still not secure in, but there is an art to "getting it done" during the dissertation process, which was emphasized by my advisor. Please don't misinterpret this statement – the decision to not perform at this point was mine – but this also highlights very clearly to me that even the most enlightened of universities and committees are still not sure how to evaluate a non-written piece. Therefore, in this dissertation I have explored performance on a theoretical level, so I could embrace the artistry in achievement by actually graduating, but in the future I set a challenge to myself to help others determine how new forms of knowing can be truly embraced in academe. I continue to look for ways to express myself beyond the written page and still be taken seriously as a researcher.

My work is about learning to understand queerness on a lot of levels, but particularly the silenced queers. In fact, discussing rural queers is a process of self-understanding. To give you a sense of my own process of self-discovery, here is poem I wrote in my research journal very early into the study.

*When I am finally safe*

*Living in a world where my neighbors don't hide their kids from me*

*And my home*

*Is there for everyone*

*I will start a new revolution.*

*I won't start it through politics.*

*Do you think politics can solve this?*

*I deny it.*

*In my world*

*People think with their heart*

*And react like children who have not been taught to hate*

*And we all cry at the same wrongs*

*And boundaries mean safety, not separation*

*No one is hungry*

*And life is still happily complicated*

*In my world everyone has distinction*

*And oppression in politics doesn't exist*

*And fences that keep out are gone*

*And battles over oil are over*

*And just a memory*

*I must make this happen*

*Through my truth*

*And then*

*I have found myself*

*I must be*

*My own source of power*

*To help others*

*Look at themselves*

*Think*

*And see me*

*For now, forget it*

*Work with me or against me, but stay out of my way*

*My evolution can encompass you or leave you behind*

*I am tired*

*Of being a constant reminder*

*To think differently*

*Or you will die alone*

*A fool*

Through the process of creating while amassing data I become emotionally attached to my research, and it was hard to separate my own rural experiences from what I was feeling/thinking/doing with my participants. This is the only way I could stay sane through a process that involved me staring at a computer, eight hours away from my university resources. However, this distance also helped me disconnect from life. I'm now starting to slowly understand that I need to reconnect, both personally and also professionally, by engaging my research into the bigger picture known as my life. Because life is really what research should be about – I'm not really into vacuums.



What do I mean by a vacuum? A research vacuum where the research process ends, and the creation of knowledge stops by the researcher. Research must be continued, and live on, and move beyond the page. This is a/r/tography. It is in the diversity of research that I continue.

*Diversity occurs within people of color communities*

*I am happy to tell you –*

*color doesn't cause racism*

*race doesn't cause it either*

*race doesn't really cause anything, except sorting,*

*gender either, except in public restrooms, and even there it's just sorting again*

*all this talk and it's all for sorting*

*organizing programs around this sorting*

*releasing studies last month and next month about this sorting,*

*writing blogs over and over about the sorting*

*writing to help segregate the sorting,*

*blowing holes in someone else's sorting by chucking a bomb at it via your pen,*

*racial progress*

*special projects being managed around this sorting.*

*Visit any bookstore and find the sorting section*

*our communities are raced and gendered*

*sexuality and religion adding flavor to the sort*

*writing and reading and pretending sex isn't there, in all its forms*

*intersections move us forward*

*read on, dear sorter, and look carefully*

*the community awaits.*

Being queer is hard, and another difficult moment for me in this process came when I was attacked professionally by a senior researcher at my institution. He made himself look a fool, but it does not remove the sting. If you want to see the moment where I thought, “Fuck it. I just want to graduate. I don’t care if I perform this or not,” then there it is. I lost myself in that bitterness and anger and suspicion. I felt so helpless. The irony of undertaking a research project to help give voice to queers in rural America only to be attacked by a member of my own community is a lesson that is burned into me through the shame I felt for doing nothing wrong.

And then I got it. This is the heart of queerness. The way of being that makes you want to ask questions and be silent, to want to be in the open and hide in the dark, to fear being attacked and to be grateful that at least someone is paying attention. I hope this project makes you feel these dichotomies.

I am an artist. I am a researcher. I am a teacher. And I am queerly yours.

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## Appendix A

### Informed Consent

**Title of Project:** Rural Sex Educators' Handling of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues (IRB#32753)

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(814) 865-2168; [jdm13@psu.edu](mailto:jdm13@psu.edu)

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research study is to explore how rural sex educators create environments which are inclusive to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students.

**Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked to participate in an online focus group during a specified two-week period.

**Duration:** It is anticipated that you will participate in the online focus group a minimum of five hours over the two week period.

**Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. The data will be stored and secured on a secure network on the Penn State University network in a password protected file. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the

research, no personally identifiable information will be shared. Your confidentiality will be kept to the degree permitted by the technologies used. No guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet by any third parties. In addition, if you choose to share the contents of this online focus group outside of the online group, it is expected that you will not share with others what individual participants wrote.

**Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Jennifer deCoste at (315) 323-8548 with questions or concerns about this study.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study. Participation in the focus group is considered your implied consent to participate in this study. Please print this form for your records.

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Guide**

1. What types of activities do you do to help students broaden their understanding of sexuality?
2. Please describe how you address issues relevant to sexual minorities in your classroom.  
How is this different (or not) from your school's handling of sexual minority issues?
3. How, if at all, does the rural environment impact your ability to teach sex education?
4. How does being in a rural environment impact your teaching of sex education as well as your ability to be inclusive to sexual minorities?
5. How do you create an environment that is inclusive to sexual minorities, including LGBT students?

## **Appendix C**

### **Recruitment Email #1**

This is the generic email, approved by IRB, which went out for recruitment.

Subject: Are you a rural sex educator who works to be inclusive to LGBT students?

I am seeking volunteers who have taught sex education in the public schools in the last five years to participate in an online focus group. This study will explore how rural sex educators create environments which are inclusive to sexual minority students.

Study requirements include participation in an online focus group, which you will be asked to access at times convenient for you during a two week period.

Contact [jud7@psu.edu](mailto:jud7@psu.edu) for more information.

This study is being conducted for research purposes and is affiliated with the Pennsylvania State University (IRB #32753).

Thanks,

Jennifer deCoste

PhD Candidate, Women's Studies and Education

Advisor: Dr. Dan Marshall

## **Appendix D**

### **Recruitment Email #2**

This is the response email sent when a potential participant responded to Recruitment Email #1 (see Appendix C).

Thank you for your interest in volunteering for the rural sex education research study. This study is being conducted for research purposes and is affiliated with the Pennsylvania State University (IRB #32753).

This email contains a few questions to ensure you meet the criteria of the study. Responding to this email in no way obligates you to participate in the study, but may result in contact via email from me. You may modify or withdraw your information at any time.

Please respond to the following questions:

1. Have you worked in a public school environment teaching sex education in the last five years?
2. Have you attempted to address LGBT issues in the sex education curriculum in some way (whether successfully or not)?
3. Have you taught a minimum of 15 hours of sex education specific instruction in at least one academic year?

What are the names and address of the rural public schools in which you have taught sex education in the last five years? Please note: this question is for classification of rural status by the National Center for Education Statistics only and will not be used to identify you in any way.

Thank you for your interest. I will be in touch shortly to let you know how we will proceed.



Jennifer deCoste

PhD Candidate, Women's Studies and Education

Advisor: Dr. Dan Marshall

## **Appendix E**

### **Recruitment Email #3**

This was a confirming email used for those who met all criteria laid out in Recruitment Email #2 (see Appendix D). The informed consent document (see Appendix B) was attached.

I am pleased to inform you that you have been chosen for the rural sex education research study.

Thank you for your interest in this research.

This study is being conducted for research purposes and is affiliated with the Pennsylvania State University (IRB #32753).

Attached you will find an informed consent form which makes you aware of how you will be protected throughout this study. You must read this form in order to be eligible to participate.

In addition, I wanted to make you aware of how the online focus group will work. To protect your identity, I have created a unique login name and password for you to use on the site. At no time during this study is it required that you identify any personal information about yourself, your location, or any personal information beyond those already shared with me. If you have any questions about this, please do not hesitate to contact me at [jud7@psu.edu](mailto:jud7@psu.edu).

The website for the focus group is: [www. groups.google.com/group/ruralsestudy](http://www.groups.google.com/group/ruralsestudy). Your unique login is:

Login Name:   xxfocusgroup

Password:       blackbird54

Alias:           Tracy

The study will officially begin on April 1, 2010 at 8AM EST, and will continue until April 14, 2010 at 8PM EST. Feel free to log in to the site before then to practice navigating the menus, and please let me know if you have any problems.

I will post five questions during this two week period, with a new question posted every three days or so. Feel free to answer the question I post as well as respond to other participants' answers. I may ask for examples and stories from your experiences and, after a few days, I will summarize the themes I see emerging from the online discussion, asking for participant feedback and clarification.

After the completion of the study, you will have the opportunity to receive an electronic or hard copy of the research at no cost to thank you for your participation.

Thank you again. I look forward to working with you on this study.

Jennifer deCoste

PhD Candidate, Women's Studies and Education

Advisor: Dr. Dan Marshall

## **Appendix F**

### **Transcript and Introduction Review Emails**

#### Transcript Review Email

Hello Rural Sex Education study participants! As promised at the end of our study together, I would like to offer you all the opportunity to review the transcripts of our study and clarify any points you may have if you feel they are unclear.

If you would like me to email you the transcript (175 pages!), please respond to this email and I will get it out right away to you electronically. Regardless of whether you participate in this step, when my dissertation is complete I will offer you the opportunity to receive a copy (either electronically or in hard copy) to thank you for your input. Again, I cannot thank you enough for your help with this project. ---Jen

#### Introduction Review Email

Hi there! I am working on the introduction to you in the study, and I wanted you to see what I have so far in case you would like to add, change, or correct anything I have so I do not misrepresent you. Thanks so much for your feedback. ---Jen

## VITA

### Jennifer M. de Coste

#### Education

2011 (anticipated)	<b>Dual Ph.D.</b>	The Pennsylvania State University Curriculum and Instruction and Women's Studies
1997	<b>M.S.</b>	University of Hartford Counseling
1994	<b>B.Mus.</b>	The Hartt School of Music Music Education

#### Professional Experience

2008 – Present	<b>Associate Vice President for Institutional Diversity Initiatives</b> , Clarkson University. Supervisor: Kathryn Johnson
2004-2008	<b>Director of Institutional Equity and Diversity</b> , Pennsylvania State University Altoona Supervisor: Sean Kelly
2001-2004	<b>Senior Training Advisor</b> , The Pennsylvania State University University Park Supervisor: Scott Smith
1997-2001	<b>Manager of Training, Instructional Design, and Project Management</b> , Siemens Supervisor: Bryan Binduga
1994-1997	<b>Public School Educator</b> , Farmington, Manchester, and Hartford Public Schools Supervisors: Various
1994-1997	<b>Assistant Director of Admission and Student Financial Assistance</b> , Univ. of Hartford Supervisor: Beth Skoglund

#### Professional Presentations (selected)

*SafeZone Training*. Presented at Clarkson University and Juniata College, 2010.

*The Intersection of Queer Theory and Rural Studies: A Model for Sex Education*. Presented at the Hawai'i International Conference on Education, Waikiki, January 2007.

*Representations of LGBTQ in Secondary School Sex Education Curricula*. Poster presented at the American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Teachers, St. Louis, June 2006.

*Paradoxical In/Visibility in Educational Research: Doctoral students' complicated illusions and identity/ies struggles*. Presented at the AERA, San Francisco, April 2006.

*Understanding Transgender Issues*. Presented at Juniata College, Huntingdon, PA, November 2005.

*Queer Theory as an Informant to Third World Women*. Presented at the Rock Ethics Institute, PSU Altoona, November 2005.

*Representations of LGBT Students in Secondary School Sex Education Curriculum*. Presented at the Rock Ethics Institute, Penn State University, Altoona, PA, April 2005.

*Silence in Academe: Creating Safe Schools for GLBTQ College Students*. Presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual University of Rhode Island Symposium on GLBTQ Issues, Kingston, RI, April 2005.

*LGBT Parenting: Challenges and Resources*. Presented at 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual LGBT Colloquium: Intricacies and Outracacies, Susquehanna University, Selinsgrove, PA, October 2004.

*Dealing with the Invisible: Supporting LGBT Adult Learners*. Presented at the Hendricks Best Practices for Adult Learners Conference, State College, PA, May 2003.

#### Book Chapters and Peer-Reviewed Articles

"Rural Queer Studies." *Critical Education*. Accepted manuscript, date still TBD.

"GLBTQ Literature." (Book Chapter). *Books and Beyond: The Greenwood Encyclopedia of New American Reading*. 2008, Greenwood Press.

"Representations of LGBT Students in the Secondary School Sex Education Curriculum." *American Journal of Sexuality Education* (under review).