Educate, Not Titillate: LGBTQ+ Issues in Sex Education

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Abstract
This study explores teachers’ perceptions and practices of challenging heteronormative discourses in gender and sexuality education. This study informs current research and asks how teachers can create LGBTQ+ inclusive classrooms when teaching gender and sexuality education. Two Ontario educators were interviewed for this study. Using a queer theory lens to analyze the data, three key findings emerged. Participants noted that in order to teach LGBTQ+ inclusive gender and sexuality education, they create “possibility models”; they curate queer educational spaces that dismantle heteronormative discourses, and co-construct student-driven spaces that invite students to participate in their education. This research indicates that there is a need for a pedagogical shift in LGBTQ+ inclusive gender and sexuality education, and can inform policy, research and practicing teachers on how to make gender and sexuality education inclusive to queer and trans identities.

Research Context
The content of sexual health curricula in the Ontario educational system is a controversial point of discussion. In July 2018, the Ontario government announced it would roll back the Ontario Sexual Health and Human Development component of the Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum, replacing it with the 1998 document. Doing so has effectively removed the mention of sexuality and gender identity from the curriculum (OME, 1998, 2015). This reinforces the heteronormative narrative that remains dominant in schools by making classrooms unsafe, putting queer and trans students' mental, emotional and sexual health at risk, and creating additional challenges for LGBTQ+ students who struggle with self-efficacy (Charest, Kleinplatz & Lund, 2016; Taylor et al, 2012). By challenging the ways in which sexual health education is taught and represented in the classroom, research in this area can begin to address how students are socialized to learn about

1 Gender and sexuality education and sexuality education refers to the Sexual Health and Human Development strand of the Ontario Health Curriculum. It is commonly referred to as “sex education” both within an Ontario context as well as around the world. As a way to not reproduce misconceptions about the content of “sex education” (i.e., teaching students how to have sex) this paper will refer to content in the Ontario Health curriculum as both gender and sexuality education and sexual health education. The only exception to this is if a participant calls it “sex education” or “sex ed”.

2 This paper will use the acronym LGBTQ+ and the terms ‘queer’ and ‘trans’. I acknowledge that the term LGBTQ+ is limiting and does not reflect the true diversity of the community and the individuals within it. For the purposes of this paper it will be used to refer to all those within the spectrum who do not identify as cisgender or heterosexual.
sex and gender identities and challenge the status quo in sexual health education to better represent the world and the LGBTQ+ community.

**Research Problem**

It is widely recognized that pre-service and practicing teachers lack the ability to effectively teach and support students when delivering gender and sexuality education lessons (McCarty-Caplan, 2013), let alone when addressing LGBTQ+ topics (Cohen, Byers & Sears, 2012). LGBTQ+ content in gender and sexuality education is often ignored or taught in a stereotypical, minimizing framework that limits the representation of LGBTQ+ identities to students (Elia & Tokunaga, 2015). To gain better insight into how teachers actualize their role in facilitating equitable, queer and trans focused gender and sexuality education, this study explores what teacher perceptions are regarding their role in challenging the heteronormative discourse of gender and sexuality education in schools, to better represent their LGBTQ+ students.

**Rationale**

Recent government changes in Ontario have altered the content delivered in gender and sexuality education across the province. LGBTQ+ focused gender and sexuality education currently paints a broad picture of sexuality and gender identity, without realizing the misconceptions and individual experiences of sexual orientation and gender identity. Because gender and sexuality education reflects heteronormative practices by systemically privileging the voice of heterosexuality, it marginalizes the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals. In doing this, educational institutions reproduce societal intolerance and prejudice towards those who identify as LGBTQ+. Thus, the purpose of this study is to look at how teachers perceive their role as allies to their LGBTQ+ students, and as agents who challenge the heteronormative undertones to the current HPE curriculum. This study explores how sentiments of activism and allyship translate into equitable practices in facilitating queer and trans-centered educational content, and what implications it has on LGBTQ+ students.

**Literature Review**

**Practicing and Pre-Service Teachers**

The results of a Canadian study in gender and sexuality education have indicated that very little awareness (61%) was given to sexual diversity in classroom and that many non-specialist Canadian teachers do not feel willing, nor prepared to provide competent sexual health education on either some or all of the topics in the curriculum (Ninomiya, 2010). Teachers were often reported using teaching methods that are not interactive or student-focused while struggling to teach a range of sexual health topics such as sexual pleasure, sexual behaviour, sexuality and gender identification (Cohen, Byers & Sears, 2012; Ninomiya, 2010). This lack of awareness within the classroom illustrates the dominant heteronormative undertones of sexual health education, and the inattention sexual orientation and gender identity receive when teaching gender and sexuality education.

**Pedagogy Problems**

Findings from a study conducted by Begoray, Wharf-Higgins & MacDonald (2009) suggest that the content of gender and sexuality curriculum as well as its implementation had limited effect on students’ ability to understand, communicate and validate sexual health information. In addition, students often experience repetitive content in their sexual health classrooms and are forced to rely on health information sources outside of their schools, mainly the media and the Internet (Begoray, Wharf-Higgins, & MacDonald, 2009). Students noted a strong dislike of generalized information
and wanted more personalized content that critically and physically engaged them in gender and sexuality education. Students also wanted more hands-on approaches and opportunities to talk with their peers about health related topics, expressed an overall desire to have more input in the content of their education and noted that queer and trans identities are rarely included in Health classes (Begoray, Wharf-Higgins, & MacDonald, 2009; Byers, Sears, & Foster, 2013; Gowen & Winges-Yanez, 2013).

Centralizing queer experiences in the classroom requires a shift in pedagogical practices that actively and consistently challenge heteronormativity while upholding an intersectional lens. Research has indicated that using universal design for learning (UDL) as a framework to include LGBTQ+ issues and students who have disabilities into gender and sexuality lessons can benefit all students by making educational settings more accessible and equitable (Couillard & Higbee, 2018; Grove, Morrison-Beedy, Russel & Hess, 2018). Using a UDL can also support the integration of LGBTQ+ inclusive content across subject areas, as research has shown that queer and trans inclusive content is most often taught in the social science and humanities alone (Snapp, Burdge, Licona, Moody & Russell, 2015). This is supported by the conceptual framework brought forth by Goldstein, Russell and Daley (2007) which further suggests that queer schools would promote “the acceptance, tolerance, and affirmation of queer students and educators, but also seek to transform how we think about sexuality and desire” (p.187). The queer schools model presented by Goldstein, Russell and Daley (2007) puts educators in the position to interrogate how sexualities of queer and straight students are “acknowledged, denied, negated and distorted through normative pedagogical practices” (p.187). These findings and suggestions illustrates that there is a need to restructure the format of gender and sexuality education and adopt a social constructivist framework that centres student voice when teaching sexual health content, while also queering the school environment so that LGBTQ+ students are given equitable representation.

**The Future of Sex Education**

Research indicates that there is a gap in sexual health education, which ignores the need for student-centered environments where students are actively discussing and curating the content of issues discussed (Allen, 2005; Sanjakdar et al., 2015). There is a demand for more informal, student-centered learning where the rigid hierarchy between students and teachers is challenged and students are given more agency in deciding the direction of their sexual health education (Allen, 2001). Allen’s (2005) research indicates that students conceptualize the content and effectiveness of their sexual health education in different ways than their teachers. The findings from that research illustrate the benefits in prioritizing and implementing sexual health education that aligns closer with student needs. This means spending more time on the subject, using interactive activities that centre student voice, providing experiential knowledge that personalize gender and sexuality education, making the content more practical, providing better access to outside resources such as health care professionals, and more professional development training targeted at improving knowledge about sexual health education (Allen, 2001; Flicker et al., 2009; Ninomiya, 2010; Taylor et al., 2012). Thus, the future of gender and sexuality education needs to support student sexual health by designing programs that acknowledge and centre student sexual agency (Allen, 2005).
Methodology

Study Design
To explore the lived, nuanced experiences of educators engaging in LGBTQ+ equity work, this research used one-on-one qualitative interviews to investigate and understand teacher perceptions of teaching gender and sexuality education. Qualitative research is often used as a way to discover answers to a given problem by examining various social settings and the groups or individuals within them (Berg & Lune, 2017). This research focused on how educators make sense of LGBTQ+ inclusive gender and sexuality education, thus a qualitative research method was used in order to explore this question in depth.

Researcher Positionality
This research is deeply personal to me as an educator and an academic. My interest in this area was because my own sexual health education was severely lacking in the Ontario education system as a queer, woman of colour. As my sexual identity shifted, I had to take an active role in unlearning the dominant and singular heteronormative narrative I was taught about LGBTQ+ identities. This struggle is evident in the work that I produce, as a researcher and educator looking for answers in the stories of other people, who are continually unlearning and evolving. Sikes (2010) notes the difference between a researcher’s ability to represent versus re-present the data and stories we are given access to as academics. This difference is understood as a researcher's ability to position themselves within the data (re-present) versus presenting the data as if it is not influenced by researcher bias or experience (represent) (Sikes, 2010). My goal in this research is to re-present the data in a way that is authentic to the participants and their experiences, but to also acknowledge my position of power and privilege as a researcher, and to challenge the heteronormative discourses I once held and believed to be true. My goal for this research is to not only give insight into how educators can continue to shift the discourse of gender and sexuality education to one that is inclusive of queer and trans identities, but also to recognize that LGBTQ+ content in education is fluid and constantly evolving.

Participant Sample
Two educators were used in this qualitative research study, both of whom work as Ontario teachers with students in grades 7-12, advocate strongly for equitable educational spaces for queer and trans students, and have had experience either teaching gender and sexuality education or facilitating sexual health workshops within the past two years. Both participants identified as White women, and one of the participants openly identified as queer. The data in this article is derived from a major research paper in the Masters of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. The program requirements restricted the participant sample to two interviews.

This research focuses strictly on educational reforms, and because the Health curriculum is in flux within Ontario, selecting teachers who have taught within the Ontario context is important. I am also only interested in how middle to high school teachers and educators address LGBTQ+ issues in gender and sexuality education, as those are the years in which controversial topics, such as sex and gender identity are taught. Participants selected for interviews needed to also be deeply committed to equity in their classrooms and uphold equitable frameworks to include LGBTQ+ content. Lastly, all the participants in this study had experience teaching gender and sexuality education in
traditional classroom settings or facilitating gender and sexuality workshops. The rationale for this was that so participants could draw on their personal experiences to inform their knowledge.

Participants were recruited on Twitter using a purposive sampling method. This method was used as a way to select participants who had extensive knowledge and expertise about the subject (Berg & Lune, 2017). Twitter, while an unconventional way to recruit participants, was a useful resource in collecting participants, as there is a vibrant and outspoken community interested in gender and sexuality in education on the platform. Despite these benefits, researchers should be cognizant of the pitfalls of using Twitter as a platform to recruit participants. Participants who were selected were already supporters and advocates of LGBTQ+ inclusive education and therefore their answers reflect a positionality that is enthusiastic and comfortable with teaching LGBTQ+ issues in schools; this may not be the case for all educators. Privacy issues related to anonymity and the reality of how participants present and curate their identities and tweets on the platform, which could lead to false information, are other areas for considerations when using the platform.

Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect their identity. Sharon is a PhD candidate and high school English teacher in Ontario and Cassie is an Ontario teacher, who facilitates sexual health and gender and sexuality workshops for teachers.

Data Collection
Participants of this study were interviewed using a semi-structured format to allow for flexibility within the actual interview process. All interviews followed the same list of questions and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Participants were interviewed in private rooms at Ryerson University and the University of Toronto.

Before proceeding with the interviews, participants were assured of their confidentiality and asked to sign consent forms outlining the interview protocol procedure. In addition, participants were briefed concerning the nature and type of study the researchers were conducting, and the ultimate goals of the research. Data was collected by pen and paper in addition to recording the interviews for transcription.

Data Analysis
This study employed a queer theory lens to critically analyze data and guide this research. The concept of queer theory is used to disrupt and challenge the traditional modes of thought in education that uphold heteronormative ideas and pedagogy of gender and sexuality education (Britzman, 1995; Bryson & De Castell, 1993; Shlasko, 2005). By critiquing the modes of normalization and actively working to dismantle them, queer theory can be used as a way for educators to explore “traditionally silenced discourses and create spaces for students to examine and challenge the hierarchy of binary identities that is created and supported by schools” (Meyer, 2007, p. 28). Queer theory ultimately offers educators an opportunity to “see schooling as a place to question, explore and seek alternative explanations” (Meyer, 2007, p. 28). By exploring the data collected through the lens of queer theory, researchers and educators can begin to understand how teachers are questioning and replacing heteronormative narratives that are deeply embedded in gender and sexuality education.
Interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy and then printed for analysis. The interviews were then analyzed to identify themes according to the sub-questions guiding this research study, as well as themes that aligned with queer theory. Using thematic analysis to draw out patterns within the interviews helped to code the interviews into prominent, overarching themes (Berg & Lune, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013) that aligned with the queer theory analysis employed in this study (Britzman, 1995; Meyer, 2007).

**Findings**

**Creating Possibility Models:** The results from this study indicated that educators enthusiastically support the creation of “possibility models” where students are presented with multiple opportunities to learn in a variety of formats that address the classroom needs. Both participants interviewed for this study remained committed to teaching a LGBTQ+ inclusive Health curriculum. These possibility models, a term coined by Sharon, are based on a pedagogical stance of creating classrooms and educational content that reaches everyone in the classroom. When teaching a LGBTQ+ inclusive Health curriculum, Sharon disclosed that,

…the students who, as far as we know, are heterosexual, often define sex in such a limited way that they're putting themselves at risk, right? So, when we, again, adopt that universal design, we're reducing STI transmission with straight kids who never realized that they could get chlamydia from oral. That helps break down the binaries of what “sex” is and helps broaden our overall understanding…because if we don't create possibility models for our students, then we're basically telling them that they don't exist or that they shouldn’t exist…so again, with that universal design for learning you just emphasize that there are so many different ways of just being a person, you're creating safety for people who never knew they needed it.

Sharon touched upon the pedagogical tool of universal design for learning. She conceptualizes UDL as being beneficial to not only queer and trans students but also students who identify as straight. She acknowledges that adopting a UDL approach to teaching gender and sexuality education can broaden everyone’s understanding of sexual activity, gender identity and sexual orientation to create possibility models for all students.

**Queering Educational Spaces:** Participants in this study spoke of their desire to break binaries and heteronormative assumptions in the classroom related to sexual orientation and gender identity. When asked how she would question heteronormative practices in her Health classes, Cassie reflected:

I ask people to define what sex means. And you often see people still refer to a heteronormative idea of what sex is but it’s important to unpack it a bit more and get them to question their beliefs. So just to sort of move away from this immediate reaction of like sex is a man and woman, penis-vagina and opening up our minds to other forms of sex and going above just this cookie cutter version of what sex is and not shooting them down, but opening up their minds to different possibilities, letting them come up with their own answers.

Cassie notes here that she begins to queer educational spaces by calling into question who can engage in different types of sexual activity. She begins to shift the conversation away from the
dominant heteronormative discussion of sex and allows for her students to broaden their understanding of what sex could look like. By allowing her students to consider other possibilities of what sex is, she is providing her students with the opportunity to interrogate their own beliefs and assumptions about sex.

Educators in this study also noted that they often integrate discussions related to gender and sexuality education into other subjects. Cassie vocalized her struggle with providing a space for students to have conversations about LGBTQ+ topics, disclosing:

…I want to be able to provide the space to have conversations about LGBTQ+ topics, issues, experiences, while not drawing so much attention to it so that it becomes like this other category. So I often will integrate it into other subject areas so it’s just part of our normal conversation and learning...so to take a more interdisciplinary approach I think is important, so that you’re not accidentally isolating students who identify as queer or trans, or even straight, into just discussions of sex ed; they see themselves everywhere.

Sharon shared this sentiment, when retelling an experience she had when a student was removed at the request of a parent from her Health class:

…because of that I went out of my way to talk about these things in every single class. So it would have been ridiculous to take this kid out all the time. So, yeah, you can leave for Health, but are you going to leave during Language Arts? Are you going to leave during History? Like, we’re going to have these conversations all the time.

Both participants acknowledged that simply teaching LGBTQ+ content within the context of Health classes was not enough. As a result, they integrated the content that covered gender and sexuality education into other subject areas. This not only breaks down binaries of what content can be covered in what subjects, but allows for discussions related to LGBTQ+ issues to be permeated throughout their students’ learning.

Creating moments where binaries and assumptions are challenged were gateways for the participants in this study to queer their classrooms. Sharon illustrated her ability to question heteronormative practices in her classroom, sharing:

I go into my classes and I automatically assume that everyone is queer and has gender fluidity, because I think it’s ridiculous that only queer and trans people have to prove themselves and disclose their identities. Yeah, I kind of reverse the closet. My students are still growing and learning and their identities are shifting so I’m actually doing more harm than good if I’m assuming they’re all straight and cisgender…and the challenge with sexual health education specifically with queer and trans students is that because they don’t see themselves reflected in anything we’re supposed to cover, so they tune out and that applies to straight students as well; like if they have these curious moments or their identity shifts, they don’t have the information because it was presented in a heterosexual context.

Sharon acknowledged that her approach to teaching includes queering the space she is in. This means that she “reverses the closet” and flips the dominant discourse of assumed heteronormativity
upside down. She notes that she does this because she wants to reach both her queer and trans students, as well as her straight students whose identities might be shifting.

**Co-constructing Student-Driven Spaces:** To further emphasize the importance of queering Health education, participants in this study noted that their pedagogical approach to teaching gender and sexuality places a high value on centering student voices, experiences and involvement. When asked how she implements queer and trans-inclusive content into her workshops for teachers, Cassie stated:

…I like to do as little talking as possible…I like to turn it to the teachers because their experiences are the most valuable piece of all. That’s the most powerful learning. And, honestly, I think the same goes for the students. Let them tell you their experiences and their stories, their fears and challenges... and then use it in your classroom. I think it'll surprise people, which is scary, that their students know a lot more than they think and they can really be the ones driving home the direction of where the sex ed is going.

Sharon continues along this line of thought, expressing:

My ideal classroom is an ongoing collaboration. I think it’s a bit ridiculous to assume that I know what’s best for my students and that they should blindly follow me. Working with my students, instead of talking at them, means that I’m able to tap into what they know and don’t know, guide my lessons so that they’re interesting and informative, but also so that it reaches the students, like the students who are at risk, or who are struggling with their sexuality or gender identity… taking time to know our students and know what they need and who they are and inviting them into a learning space made just for them is powerful stuff.

Both Cassie and Sharon acknowledge the power of student and teacher voices working collaboratively in the classroom and see the value in co-creating space where the binaries between students and teachers are challenged. Giving students the space to have their questions, experiences and struggles heard and inviting them into the construction of learning provides a fruitful opportunity for educators to question binaries and heteronormative discourses when teaching about gender and sexuality.

**Discussion**

The findings of this research indicate that teachers challenge heteronormative discourses in gender and sexuality education in a variety of ways, including creating possibility models, queering educational spaces by integrating LGBTQ+ discussions across the curriculum and co-constructing student-driven spaces. These findings indicate that there is a need for a pedagogical shift in how teachers are approaching and teaching LGBTQ+ inclusive gender and sexuality education so that all students are learning and engaged in their sexual health education. This is particularly useful for practicing educators who struggle with teaching LGBTQ+ inclusive gender and sexuality lessons, as well as pre-service teachers who are beginning their careers.

One of the major themes that emerged in this study was that educators felt the need to create possibility models for their students as a way of shifting their pedagogical practice to be more
queer and trans inclusive. Educators conceptualized possibility models as being LGBTQ+ focused with the intention of reaching and being valuable for all students in the classroom. In adopting a universal design for learning (UDL) approach to teaching gender and sexuality education, educators in this study recognized that they can broaden everyone’s understanding of sexual health, gender identity and sexual orientation and create possibility models for all students. While UDL is typically framed within disability and special needs educational frameworks, it has powerful implications when applied to a gender and sexuality educational context that examines how students are marginalized based on gender identity and sexual orientation (Couillard & Higbee, 2018). UDL as a pedagogical practice in LGBTQ+ focused education provides the needed sexual health information for queer and trans students, while also being beneficial for all students by making gender and sexuality education more accessible, equitable and inclusive (Grove, Morrison-Beedy, Russel & Hess, 2018; Couillard & Higbee, 2018). When educators anticipate queer and trans identities in a gender and sexuality class, it redefines the dominant narrative of heteronormativity and creates spaces that are sexuality and gender-expectant for all students.

Another finding of this study indicated that in order for LGBTQ+ inclusive gender and sexuality education to occur in schools, teachers must actively and consciously “queer” their educational learning environment. In the context of this study, queering refers to the act of making an educational space welcoming, expecting (hicks, 2017) and inviting to queer and trans students. While “queering” an educational space, the content being taught and the pedagogical approach to teaching look different for every educator; the participants in this study conceptualized it as challenging dominant heteronormative beliefs and assumptions of sex, gender and sexual orientation and integrating LGBTQ+ content across the curriculum.

Participants frequently noted that their efforts to challenge heteronormative discourses in gender and sexuality education meant challenging student perceptions and assumptions of sexual acts, sexual orientation and gender identity. One of the participants noted that she does this by “reversing the closet” as a way to acknowledge that the identities of her students are still shifting. By actively engaging in critical discussions with their students that ask them to question and interrogate their beliefs, educators create queering moments (Goldstein, Russell & Daley, 2007) where heteronormative discourses and rigid binaries are disrupted (Britzman, 1995; Bryson & De Castell, 1993; Meyer, 2007; Shlasko, 2005). These critical discussions ultimately become a gateway for educators to dismantle the deeply embedded heteronormative narratives that remain prominent in gender and sexuality education. Creating queer moments (Goldstein, Russell & Daley, 2007) in the classroom can help combat the limited representation given to LGBTQ+ identities in the Health curriculum (Elia & Tokunaga, 2015) and create safe spaces for queer and trans students who are often forced to learn in environments that are not productive or representative of them (McCarty-Caplan, 2013).

Queer educational spaces were also conceptualized as being spaces where teachers can challenge the rigid structure of curriculum content and integrate LGBTQ+ discussions across subject matter. Educators in this study acknowledged that they valued approaching LGBTQ+ topics within other curriculum areas as a way to not “other” (Kumashiro, 2000) LGBTQ+ identities. For the participants in this study, this was part of the process of breaking binaries between subject matter and challenging the rigid curriculum structure teachers are asked to adhere to. By infusing LGBTQ+ content into more than just their Health classes, teachers in this study were able to challenge the
normative approach to teaching gender and sexuality education by offering the content in other subjects. Integration of LGBTQ+ content into other subject areas has the ability to dismantle the perception that LGBTQ+ identities and issues are only present within the context of gender and sexuality education. This can help with students who feel alienated by the singular context in which queer and trans topics are discussed in Health classes (Schmidt, 2010) and to create actual inclusion, not just the perception of inclusion and tolerance (Shlasko, 2005). This finding illustrates that LGBTQ+ content that is covered in gender and sexuality education can be integrated into other subject areas as opposed to only delivering it in Health classes, or subject areas that neatly align with the humanities (Schmidt, 2010; Snapp et al, 2015). This challenges the idea that sex, sexual orientation and gender identity can only be taught within the context of the Health curriculum, and makes all teachers responsible of teaching those topics, not just educators who teach gender and sexuality education.

Educators in this study acknowledged that one of the ways they queer their educational spaces was by co-constructing student-driven environments in their classrooms. Participants expressed their support for centering student voices, experiences and input as a way to facilitate and address the needs of queer and trans students. By tapping into the voices and experiences of their students, teachers were able to co-construct a learning environment that was student-driven and invitational. This finding suggests that there is space in the classroom for a collaborative gender and sexuality program that illustrates the benefits in prioritizing and implementing sexual health education that aligns closer with LGBTQ+ student needs. Research in LGBTQ+ student-centered learning in gender and sexuality education is largely missing from the literature despite evidence that suggests it is needed (Allen, 2001, 2005; Begoray, Wharf-Higgins, & MacDonald, 2009; Byers, Sears & Foster, 2013; Cohen, Byers & Sears, 2012; Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2013; Ninomiya, 2010; Sanjakdar et al., 2015). And while some participatory research is slowly beginning to emerge (Allen & Rasmussen, 2017; Coll, O’Sullivan & Enright, 2018; Johnson et al., 2016, 2017; Quinlivan, 2018), the political and social contexts of the studies do not align with the current political climate in Ontario. Engaging in participatory research with queer and trans students who are directly affected by heteronormative discussions in gender and sexuality education in Ontario can give students the opportunity to gain a sense of agency in challenging the inequities inherent in their education. Ultimately, student-centered educational spaces can aid in dismantling the heteronormative overtones in education and question power dynamics that uphold structures of heteronormativity and heterosexism (Goldstein, Russell & Daley, 2007).

**Conclusion and Implications**

The goal of this study was to explore how educators conceptualize their role in challenging the heteronormative discourses in gender and sexuality education, so that LGBTQ+ identities are better represented. Participants of this study identified findings that illustrate the need for creating possibility models for all students, curating queer educational spaces, and co-constructing student-driven spaces that invite students to participate in their education. These findings comment on the need for a pedagogical shift in approaching LGBTQ+ content in gender and sexuality education and indicate that there is a need to dismantle the heteronormative overtones to the current Health curriculum taught in Ontario (OME, 1998, 2015). This research builds upon the work of others who have argued for a restructuring of the sexual health curricula in educational contexts and further suggests that educators, policy makers and researchers need to be critical of the voices and experiences that are centered in the Ontario sexual health curricula. This research demonstrates
the need for practicing teachers to actively and consciously queer their classrooms and the content that they are delivering by challenging heteronormative assumptions and integrating LGBTQ+ discussions across subjects. It also indicates that teachers need to include their students in the content and direction of their learning, providing them with enough input to share their voices and experiences so that students are the ones guiding their gender and sexuality education. As previously stated, the lack of participatory research on LGBTQ+ inclusive education indicates there is an informational gap in both academic and professional spheres on how student-driven gender and sexuality education could be implemented (Allen & Rasmussen, 2017; Coll, O’Sullivan & Enright, 2018; Johnson et al., 2016, 2017; Quinlivan, 2018; Sanjakdar et al., 2015), especially within the Ontario context where political shifts in provincial government and a racially and ethnically diverse student population pose more difficult and complex challenges in gender and sexuality education. This research was informed and influenced by the creation and removal of the 2015 Health and Physical Education curriculum in Ontario. It would be negligent to dismiss that this study comments on the political moment that Ontario is currently in. Policy and curriculum reforms can create momentum for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ focused gender and sexuality education, but those reforms need to be continuously supported by teacher-activism and rigorous research at an institutional level.

**References**


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