

Running head: TEACHING GENDER AND SEXUAL DIVERSITY IN THE CATHOLIC  
SCHOOL CONTEXT

**Teaching Gender and Sexual Diversity in the Catholic School Context**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative research study addresses the topics of teaching gender and sexual diversity in the Catholic school context, homophobic bullying among children and youths, as well as the conflicting roles of Catholic educators to instill the Catholic faith in their practice, while also meeting various human rights. Existing literature suggests that the presentation of gender and sexual diversity themes in schools help to build tolerance and acceptance among children and in turn can help reduce bullying and abuse. The literature also suggests that by reducing and interfering with instances of homophobic bullying, teachers can help create a positive school climate where students can experience lower stress levels and a more positive overall wellbeing. This study explores how a sample of three Catholic educators create opportunities for students to learn about sexual and gender diversity in ways that speak to, rather than discard their Catholic faith, without excluding or shaming individuals who do not conform to heterosexual norms. Overarching themes include the implementation of gender and sexual diversity themes in the Catholic classroom, and the varying responses and outcomes from administrators, colleagues, students' parents and students. As a beginning teacher, I have gained insight into how Catholic educators can use the Catholic faith as a tool for teaching about the acceptance, inclusion and celebration of people in the LGBTIQ+ community, so that they can ensure that all students' human rights are being met.

**Key Words:** gender and sexual diversity in the Catholic classroom, LGBTIQ+, homophobic bullying, human rights, Catholic educators

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.0 Research Context

Bullying. An extremely prevalent affair in the context of school aged children. An occurrence that is far too often overlooked and powerful enough to have life-threatening ramifications (Egale, 2015). A more narrow type is homophobic bullying; where victims are solely targeted for their perceived and/or identified gender and sexual orientation (Horn et al., 2009, as cited by Hong & Garbarino, 2012). While a teacher's role can have a very large impact on bullying, many teachers do not realize their potential impact on it (Calafiti, 2013). Fortunately, the Ontario Ministry of Education [OME] has recently recognized an increasing rate of discrimination in our society and that racism, religious intolerance, homophobia and gender-based violence are still far too evident throughout Ontario's schools (Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, 2009, as cited by Hernandez, 2013).

This recognition is reflected in the following Ontario policies: (1) the *2009 Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119*, which focuses on developing and implementing equity and inclusive education policies in Ontario schools, (2) the *Ontario Human Rights Code [OHRC]*, which prohibits discrimination on race, colour, ancestry, place of origin, citizenship, ethnic origin, disability, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, family status and marital status, thus supporting and mandating LGBTIQ+ issues within the classroom, (3) the Toronto District School Board [TDSB] *Policy Against Gender-Based Violence*, which is committed to eliminating gender-based violence in its schools, and (4) TDSB Policy: *Challenging Homophobia and Heterosexism: A K-12 Curriculum Resource Guide*, suggesting numerous ways to address and challenge heteronormativity quickly and efficiently while linking to curriculum expectations (Equitable and Inclusive Schools, 2011; Ontario Human Rights Code, 1990, as cited

by Hernandez, 2013). The Toronto Catholic District School Board [TCDSB] also reflects some of this recognition in their *Respecting Differences* policy document, which is meant to promote equity and respect for all students (Ontario Catholic School Trustee's Association [OCST], 2012). However, in its commitment to the Catholic faith and its teachings through the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], it outlines explicit rules that all people must bind to, and that anyone belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community cannot do without unnaturally conforming to heterosexual norms (OCST, 2012).

### **1.0.1 Clarification of Terms**

For the purpose of this paper, I will address some terms that can be interpreted differently to clarify my intentions for particular word choices.

With regards to the age group I have chosen to focus on, I will use “children” and “youth” interchangeably. While “children” resembles approximately ages birth-15 years, and “youth” encompasses ages 16 plus, some of the literature explored addresses only one of the groups on topics that apply to both parties. Although my focus is on teaching elementary aged children, I believe that some issues and strategies discussed are still applicable to high school aged students. Thus, to clarify, my study will focus primarily on elementary aged children, with some literature and findings that report data on youth as well.

When referring to gender and sexual diverse individuals, I will use the acronym LGBTIQ+ to encompass a community of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, questioning, asexual, pansexual, and/or two spirited. I have added the plus sign (+) to include anyone that has not been mentioned but may still belong to the community. While much of the literature sometimes refers to a singular member of this community, I intend for my topic to address all members where applicable.

The term “homosexual” is used in the context of the Catholic faith and its own policies and documents. I would like to acknowledge that although this term may offend some people, I do not in any way intend to use it offensively.

Lastly, throughout this study, I shed light on LGBTIQ+ themes as being both controversial and sensitive. I have decided to personally refer to these themes as sensitive issues as I believe this term encompasses a flexible approach to an issue that is viewed by many differing perspectives. However, I would like to acknowledge that while this is open to the interpretation of each individual, there are many perspectives (e.g., Catholic) that may view these themes as controversial. Further discussion of these two themes can be found within Chapter 2.

### **1.1 Articulation of the Research Problem**

Much of the research problem in this study stems from the contradictions between the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (2013), the *Constitution Act of 1867* and Catholicism’s governing beliefs as stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC]. While Section 15 (1) of the *Charter* provides protection against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, the *1867 Constitution Act* guarantees the Catholic Church the right to make decisions with respect to that education; allowing for the implementation of homophobic views that identify homosexual acts as “intrinsically disordered” and contrary to the natural law (CCC, 2011, para. 2357). As a result, Catholic educators are faced with a role that requires them to meet two differing laws, where the attainment of one requires neglect of the other.

Some of Catholicism’s governing beliefs disregard those who live as part of the LGBTIQ+ community. While the CCC (2011) claims that people identifying as homosexual “must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity,” (para. 2357) it also states in paragraphs 2358-2359 that *these persons* [homosexuals] are “called to chastity by the virtues of

self-mastery that team them inner freedom so that they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian *perfection*.” This communicates that although homosexual persons must be accepted, they can only be accepted if they can overcome their *condition* of homosexuality and conform to the heterosexual norms of Christian *perfection*.

This results in Catholic resistance to the development of today’s Liberal societal norms. Through being so caught up in dictating its conservative principles, Catholicism ends up ignoring the realities of liberalism and intentionally remains blinded to the various social conditions and influences of its population (Brennan, 2010). This is especially reflected through the Catholic school system’s lack of education about LGBTIQ+ themes, where the main focus is on teaching that God’s perfect image is a heterosexual world and if people do not conform to this then they cannot be accepted.

Swartz (2003) explains that without accurate knowledge, children resort to theorizing about sexuality, sexual identity, gender roles, and sexual orientation based on their family, friends, religion, media and other social and cultural influences (as cited by Flores, 2012). This can potentially result in children developing theories that are governed by fear and negative attitudes (Swartz, 2003, as cited by Flores, 2012). Unfortunately, these actions either maintain homophobic attitudes, which feeds homophobic bullying, or it pushes youth away from wanting to learn anything further about their Catholic faith because of the system’s inability to self reflect and acknowledge the lived realities and histories of its own followers (Brennan, 2010). This is significant because in neglecting to address and provide opportunities to discuss LGBTIQ+ themes, potential knowledge among children and youths is being replaced with ignorance that drives homophobic attitudes and potentially increases instances of homophobic bullying.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

As a response to the prevalence of homophobia in schools and society, the purpose of my research study is to learn how Catholic educators can teach gender and sexual diversity in ways that affirm Catholic teachings and values. I hope to take what I learn from this research and apply it to my own practices so that I can encourage the instilment of empathy, and the reduction of bullying and its guiding ignorance in my own students, ultimately aiding in the creation of safe school spaces to produce feelings of acceptance and the positive embracement of diversity. While policies have already been implemented in various public school boards for the inclusive education about gender and sexual diverse students (e.g., the TDSB), it is important to spark that same drive for progressive inclusivity in the Catholic district school boards, so that children of all gender and sexual orientations can grow up in a safe space that will empower their self-image and improve their wellbeing.

It is through the critical lens of Catholic education (alongside public education) that this study will explore ways in which educators can either continue to nurture homophobic attitudes and behaviours or inform them through the implementation of education that acknowledges and accepts sexual and gender diversity. More importantly, this study will explore ways in which Catholic educators can educate about LGBTIQ+ themes in a way that aligns with and speaks to the Catholic faith, rather than clashing with it. Attention will also be brought to the differences between the Catholic and public school systems in Ontario with regards to their differing governing policies and beliefs. Lastly, this study will discuss the ethical implications for LGBTIQ+ education in school-aged students, which may include the instilment of empathy, the reduction of bullying and its guiding ignorance, and the creation of safe school spaces to produce feelings of acceptance and the positive embracement of diversity.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

The main question guiding this research study is: How do a sample of Catholic educators create opportunities for students to learn about sexual and gender diversity in ways that speak to, rather than discard their Catholic faith, without excluding or shaming individuals who do not conform to heterosexual norms?

Subsidiary questions guiding this investigation include:

- How did these teachers develop a commitment to teaching about sexual and gender diversity in Catholic school contexts?
- What factors and resources support teachers in this work?
- In these teachers' experiences, how do administrators and parents respond to their emphasis on these topics? How do these teachers deal with negative responses?
- What outcomes do these teachers see from students after implementing such themes in their classroom and school communities?

### **1.4 Background of the Researcher (Reflexive Positioning Statement)**

I grew up spending most of my time with my family; an older sister, and a younger brother. The three of us started dance lessons at a very young age and this exposed us to a world dominated by females, with the exception of a few males who were automatically labelled as “sissy,” “gay,” and/or “unique.” As a boy who danced, my brother was often labelled as these terms, even though I never really saw him as anything close to “sissy,” “gay” or “unique.” To me, he was just my younger brother with whom I danced with, played with, dressed up with (and yes, he loved wearing my dance costumes), performed our own shows with and went to school with.

The older we got, the more obvious it became that my brother was “different.” All the boys at school played sports and liked to wrestle, and my brother preferred to dance, act and put shows together. In a society that is so constrained by constructed gender norms, my brother’s interests were always questioned and challenged by both adults and children. As a result, my family quickly learned that my brother’s interest in dance and the arts was not socially acceptable, as it “made him gay.” This led him to making the decision to lie about dancing when he entered the fifth grade, forcing him to hide one of the biggest parts of his life from people he spent every single day with up until he entered Grade 9. Instead of sharing his passion and interests with his friends, my brother had to feel ashamed for loving dance, which constantly restrained him from being his true self. In moments of sibling rivalry, I remember using this to my advantage. I understood that it bothered him to be called “gay” and when I was really angry with him, I would join in on the ridiculous name-calling, and call him “gay” as if it was one of the worst insults to say (which at that time, it probably was).

With a background in Early Childhood Studies, I can only imagine the negative impact this had on his self-image, self-esteem and wellbeing. While looking back on these experiences, I remember feeling really sad for my brother having to lie about himself for such a large part of his life. However, I also remember feeling really satisfied when we were fighting and I was able to use the word “gay” to insult him. This makes me question how I could be so mean, while thinking that using the word “gay” in a condescending way was okay. I think that this best ties back to my religious upbringing, where I attended Catholic elementary and secondary schools. Evidently, my time in the Catholic school system was driven strictly by heterosexual norms. We learned nothing about the LGBTIQ+ community, and even though I grew up with a brother who

later came out as gay, I was completely ignorant to the idea of gender and sexual diversity and the struggles that those individuals have to endure every single day of their lives.

It was not until my post-secondary education at Ryerson University that I began to learn about diverse social groups, bringing a vast amount of guilt and shame to my past. How could I not realize that so much of our population is not heterosexual? Or that there are more religious groups (with many differing governing beliefs) than just Roman Catholic? It is evident that as a result of my very singular educational upbringing that I was instilled with a lot of ignorance surrounding many different social groups that are so close to me in proximity and blood relations, which has contributed to my educational belief that ignorance is the foundation to almost all forms of bullying, discrimination and othering. I believe that it is through educating children about all relevant topics (even those deemed sensitive) that educators will be able to eradicate ignorance among children and eventually diminish the level of bullying that is so prevalent in today's schools.

Taking all of this into consideration sheds light on how I have come to the point of writing a research paper on this topic. As a result of my past and me currently identifying as both Catholic and an LGBTQ+ ally, I have a strong interest in learning how to make the professional connection between the two currently conflicting worlds. I want to use education as a tool to instil empathy in my students; not in a way that will other particular groups, but in a way that will encourage children to think before they act and become sensible human beings. I have had much experience working with children and have learned that they are extremely receptive of new knowledge, making it critical to educate them about sensitive topics before they are able to attach negative connotations to them. The perplexity of this however, is learning how to do this while still being respectful towards everyone's religious and moral beliefs and practices. It is

important to me that I am able to learn how to incorporate LGBTIQ+ topics in a Catholic context without having to risk my future teaching position and/or neglect all Catholic beliefs that I was raised to believe. The motive driving this study is the social issue of homophobic bullying, as I believe that the root cause for homophobic bullying is the ignorance that drives homophobic attitudes, which are then carried out through perceived power imbalances between a bully and its victim(s). My goal is to carry out what I learn into my own teaching practices to provide my students with a meaningful educative experience, where they can grow into well-rounded, empathetic, life-long learners.

### **1.5 Preview of the Whole MTRP**

To respond to the research questions, I will be conducting a qualitative research study using purposeful sampling to interview three Catholic educators about their experiences and strategies for implementing and providing opportunities for their elementary aged students to learn about gender and sexual diversity in ways that affirm their Catholic identities and values. In Chapter 2, I review literature in the areas of Catholicism's governing principals with regards to sexual orientation and homosexuality, LGBTIQ+ themes in the elementary classroom, homophobic bullying, the conflicting *Charter* and *Constitution Act* laws, and educator attitudes for incorporating these themes in the Catholic elementary school system. Next, in Chapter 3 I will discuss my research methods and research design, as well as elaborate on important factors such as the details about the sampling group and limitations that may apply. In Chapter 4 I report my research findings and then discuss them in light of the current literature addressed in Chapter 2. Lastly, Chapter 5 will provide a short overview of my key findings and their significance, which will aid me in addressing their key implications for the Catholic educative system and further responses to homophobic bullying. I will conclude this paper with recommendations for

the current field, suggestions for future research studies and a brief summary of my most significant findings.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.0 Introduction**

In this chapter, I review literature in the areas of homophobic bullying, LGBTIQ+ themes in the elementary classroom, Catholicism's governing principals with regards to sexual orientation and homosexuality, the conflicting *Charter* and *Constitution Act* laws, and educator attitudes for incorporating these themes in the Catholic elementary school system. I start by reviewing literature in the area of Catholic schools and sexual orientation and I consider its governing policies and how they collide with specific human rights. Next, I review research on sensitive and controversial issues such as LGBTIQ+ themes in the public and Catholic school contexts in order to explore the various teacher supports (or lack of) for the implementation of LGBTIQ+ themes in Catholic elementary classrooms. From there, I review literature on homophobic bullying, its effects on children and youth, and possible effective responses to it to better understand what needs to be done to aid in the reduction of homophobic bullying in 21<sup>st</sup> century schools. Finally, I review educator roles and attitudes towards homophobic bullying and LGBTIQ+ themes within the classroom to highlight the potential influence that educators have in changing the lives and experiences of LGBTIQ+ students in the Catholic school system.

### **2.1 Catholic School Education and Sexual Orientation**

This section discusses the development of Catholic schools in Ontario, as well as their governing policies and beliefs. It also explores the issues that arise when LGBTIQ+ themes are brought into the Catholic school context.

### **2.1.1 Catholic Schools in Ontario**

Roman Catholic schools were established in 1867 when the *Constitution Act* gave the right for a separate Catholic school system in Ontario (Lewis, 2011). Initially, these schools were funded by local parishes and communities, causing a lot of pressure to match the government funds that were once only given to public secular schools (Brennan, 2010). By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Roman Catholic schools were given complete and equal funding to the public school system in Ontario (Brennan, 2010). As a result, Ontario currently has two separate school systems (Catholic and public) that are both publicly funded and legally obligated to follow the same public curriculum.

The main differences between these two school systems are their governing principles and beliefs. While both school systems are governed by public policy (the *Charter*, the *OHRC*, and the Ontario Government curriculum), the Catholic school system is also governed by Catholicism, which holds a body of beliefs that do not necessarily coincide with some of the policies provided by public policy.

### **2.1.2 Governing Policies and Beliefs**

This section focuses on Catholicism's governing beliefs that relate to chastity, homosexuality, and sexual orientation. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC]* states that tradition declares homosexual acts as "intrinsically disordered" and contrary to the natural law, as they close the sexual act to the gift of life and do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity (2011, para. 2357). In paragraph 2357, the *CCC* (2011) also claims that while the number of men and women who carry homosexual tendencies is large, and that the homosexual tendency is objectively disordered, people who identify as homosexual "must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity," and that every sign of unjust discrimination

in their regard should be avoided. Contrarily, the *CCC* (2011) also states that *these persons* [homosexuals] are “called to fulfill God’s will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their *condition*” (para. 2358). Although the *CCC* is stating that homosexuals must be accepted, referring to them as “*these persons*” attaches a negative connotation that others them and labels them as inferior to heterosexual Catholics. The *CCC* also addresses homosexuality as a “*condition*” that causes suffering, which problematizes the individual, rather than looking at the governing principle as being problematic itself. Another claim that the *CCC* (2011) makes is that “homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that team them inner freedom so that they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian *perfection*” (para. 2359). This indicates that heterosexual Christians are perfect and homosexual Christians are meant to strive for that same perfection. Catholicism also mandates that homosexual persons must first overcome the difficult “*condition*” or “*inclination*” that is homosexuality.

Moreover, Catholicism claims that homosexuals will only be accepted if they act as though they are heterosexual, as “among the sins gravely contrary to chastity are masturbation, fornication, pornography, and homosexual practices” (*CCC*, 2011, para. 2396) and under no circumstances can homosexual acts ever be approved (*CCC*, 2011, para. 2357). This potentially influences the development of homophobic attitudes among practicing Catholics and sends the message that although homosexual persons must be accepted, they can only be accepted if they act as if their *condition* of homosexuality does not exist.

### **2.1.3 LGBTIQ+ Themes in Catholic Schools?**

While the Catholic faith offers wonderful guiding virtues such as love, peace, honesty, acceptance and forgiveness (through the *Catholic Social Teachings*) (Cummings, 2013), it too

often fails to meet the needs and human rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals through its negligence to teach about and acknowledge existing LGBTIQ+ themes in its school system. Reasons for this could be that Catholic beliefs are bound to cultural norms like heterosexist tradition, which then results in its school system being subjected to codes of obedience that demand acculturation to Catholicized ways of being, acting and expressing oneself in the world (Grace and Wells, 2005). The result of this is the silencing and privatizing of LGBTIQ+ issues (Grace & Wells, 2005), which insulates students from learning about particular human rights violations, and ultimately violates the fact that the best protection against human rights abuses is human rights education (Callaghan, 2012). Bickmore (1999) further clarifies that homophobia and the violence associated “can only be alleviated by expanding rather than restricting the knowledge and experiences made available to students” (as cited by Callaghan, 2012, p. 39).

#### **2.1.4 Conflicting Problem - Human Rights versus Faith/Catholicism**

Education that neglects to acknowledge and accept differences (i.e., homosexuality) can be deeply harmful to children (Ellwood, 2014, p. 45). In an interview conducted by Ellwood (2014), interviewee Amy discusses that several of her students had been taught that “they were on a serious path on the road to hell and they needed to have the ‘gay’ prayed out of them.” These students had come to Amy in tears because they worried that they were evil and would one day go to hell for being gay (Ellwood, 2014, p. 45). When looking at the Catholic school system’s negligence for teaching LGBTIQ+ issues, there is an evident clash between the denominational rights of Catholicism’s exclusionary beliefs and the individual rights under the *Charter* (Grace and Wells, 2005). While Section 93 of the *1867 Constitution Act* guarantees the Catholic Church the right to its own publicly funded school system, and the right to make decisions with respect to that education, Section 15 (1) of the *Charter* provides protection against

discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. And while the Assembly of Catholic Bishops in Ontario [ACBO] (2004) and the CCC both view homosexual acts as “an intrinsic moral evil” or sin, it becomes apparent that the Catholic school system may be unable to fully provide individual rights under the *Charter* to all its students (specifically LGBTIQ+ individuals) (Grace & Wells, 2005; Callaghan, 2007, 2012, as cited by Ellwood, 2014). The root of this problem lies in the fact that the two governing policies (*1867 Constitution Act and the Charter*) contradict one another. By aligning with the institutional Church’s rights regarding the provision of denominational education (as guaranteed in section 93 of the *Constitution Act* in 1867), the Catholic school system is violating human rights as protected under Section 15 of the *Charter* with regards to LGBTIQ+ themes and individuals (Grace & Wells, 2005). This makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible to follow one law without breaking or going against the other.

### **2.1.5 Social Justice Education**

The Catholic education system promotes social justice as one of its core values. However, it is so caught up in dictating conservative principles that it in turn ignores the realities of liberalism and intentionally remains blinded to the various social conditions and influences of its population (Brennan, 2010). This can potentially result in several negative ethical implications such as homophobic bullying and negative affects on mental health. If educators can positively incorporate LGBTIQ+ themes into the Catholic school system, then perhaps a positive ethical implication could be the instilment of empathy, where students learn to understand people who are “different” and become less inclined to partake in bullying behaviours.

## **2.2 Controversial and Sensitive Issues**

This section distinguishes the difference between controversial and sensitive issues and then provides supports and insights for teaching such issues in both public and Catholic school contexts.

### **2.2.1 The Difference/Clarifying the Terms**

A social issue can be viewed as controversial or sensitive depending on the lens in which one chooses to view it. In the case of LGBTIQ+ issues, religion plays a vast role in determining this. If looking at LGBTIQ+ individuals through a Catholic lens, the issue may be viewed as controversial as it contradicts what Catholicism teaches (e.g., homosexual acts cannot be accepted). Contrarily, looking at LGBTIQ+ individuals through a non-Catholic lens, it can be viewed as sensitive due to the neutrality that comes through acknowledging that (1) it contradicts religious beliefs and (2) that the issue applies to people that fall both within and outside of the jurisdiction. Despite which lens social issues are viewed through, the characteristics of the social groups associated with them do not change, nor should the amount of attention they get in any education system.

### **2.2.2 Teaching Sensitive/Controversial Issues in a General School Context**

Teaching sensitive issues in early childhood through to adolescence is critical for the health of youth and society. Swartz (2003) explains that without accurate knowledge, children resort to theorizing about sexuality, sexual identity, gender roles, and sexual orientation based on their family, friends, religion, media and other social and cultural influences (as cited by Flores, 2012). This can potentially result in children developing theories that are governed by fear and negative attitudes, which is why it is important for children to be learning accurate information about LGBTIQ+ themes (Swartz, 2003, as cited by Flores, 2012). Unfortunately, many people

view discussions about LGBTIQ+ issues to be inappropriate for children in the elementary grades (Bhana, 2007; Blackburn, 2005; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007; Roggman, 2001, as cited by Flores, 2012). However, Birkett, Espelage and Koenig (2009) argue that childhood and adolescence are appropriate times for introducing multicultural education because it is the same time they are discovering their sexual identity. In fact, Dubé and Savin-Williams' (1999) study of gay youth found that children became aware of their sexual orientation at the age of 10 years, and Bell et al., (1981), and Savin-Williams and Lenhart (1990) found consistent figures with LGBTIQ+ students experiencing feelings of being different as early as adolescence (as cited by Birkett et al., 2009). Additionally, media, current events, families, friendships, law, politics, religion and youth culture all play a role in making homosexuality a reality in the lives of today's children (Bhana, 2007; Ferfolia, 2007; Milton, 2003; Roffman, 2001, as cited by Flores, 2012). Hong and Garbarino (2012) express that recognizing media influence on public attitudes and youth behaviours is the first necessary step for preventing homophobic bullying in schools. The frequent use of mass and social media by students and teachers in the classroom creates a need for practitioners to increase teachers' and school officials' awareness and understanding between mass media and homophobic bullying (Hong & Garbarino, 2012), which can ultimately lead to effective preventative measures for homophobic bullying.

Blackburn (2005) and Manning (2000) explain that introducing multicultural education topics to young students can benefit them by providing them with experiences that advocate positive feelings towards themselves, others and their diverse surroundings (as cited by Flores, 2012). This further supports why elementary aged students should be learning about LGBTIQ+ themes. Even if they are not sexually active themselves, it is healthy for them to have the foundational knowledge that will aid questioning individuals in coming to terms with their

sexual identity, and aid heterosexual individuals in accepting those who are gender and sexually diverse. This will firstly normalize LGBTIQ+ themes (e.g., gender diversity) and secondly, assist LGBTIQ+ individuals with feeling more at ease, less isolated, and more accepted when it comes to sexual orientation of themselves and the people around them.

### **2.2.3 Support for Teaching Sensitive Issues**

In light of LGBTIQ+ issues being sensitive, it becomes debatable how often (and to what extent) educators should be incorporating these topics into their classrooms. In recent years, policies have been implemented that support the teaching of sensitive issues. For example, the *Accepting Schools Act (Bill 13)* (2012) requires all school boards to implement policies that combat bullying and “promote a positive school climate that is including and accepting of all pupils including pupils of any race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status or disability.” *Bill 13* (2012) also calls for the implementation of “activities or organizations that promote the awareness and understanding of, and respect for, people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, including organizations with the name gay-straight alliance or another name.” The *2009 Policy/Program Memorandum, No. 119* which is *Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools* also supports the teaching of sensitive issues (Hernandez, 2013) and lastly, Grace and Wells (2005) state that the Canadian Teachers’ Federation [CTF] and the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario [ETFO] (2003) have amended their codes of professional conduct and statements of teacher’s rights and responsibilities to include sexual orientation as a character of person to be protected against discrimination in keeping with the law and the land, which ultimately protects any educator who identifies as LGBTIQ+ or chooses to teach to these issues.

As a result of these progressive political changes, the public school system has made recent progress in bringing LGBTIQ+ issues into the classroom. This is evident in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) as it is the greatest board in integrating sexual diversity issues into the curriculum (Borst, 2003). In collaboration with ETFO, teachers within the TDSB have created *Rainbows and Triangles*: a curriculum document intended for challenging homophobia and heterosexism in the K-6 classroom (Borst, 2003). This curriculum includes topics on family diversity (e.g., families with two moms or two dads), pride day, discrimination and harassment experiences in sexism, racism and homophobia, and it extends the meaning of the word “multicultural” to include gay, lesbian, religious and disabilities communities (Borst, 2003). This illustrates one way that school and government policies have adapted over time to accommodate the changing needs of today’s social world.

#### **2.2.4 Teaching Sensitive/Controversial Issues in a Catholic School Context**

Contrary to the public school system, the Catholic school system can be excused from implementing such programs due to their right to provide religious education under the *1867 Constitution Act*. The Catholic school system is also fearful and resistant to the challenges of today’s liberal society (Brennan, 2010). The Catholic school system uses denominational education as a vehicle to impose and maintain Catholic tradition by privatizing LGBTIQ+ issues (Grace & Wells, 2005). As a result, Catholic school administrators and educators are not adapting the system fast enough to ensure faith conviction in their youth (Brennan, 2010). Instead, they are unintentionally pushing youth away from wanting to learn anything further because of the system’s inability to self reflect and acknowledge the lived realities and histories of its own followers (Brennan, 2010). In choosing to focus on traditional Catholic principles, the Catholic school system is ironically neglecting their own principles at the same time. By

neglecting to mention or teach to LGBTIQ+ themes that go beyond the acknowledgement of the terms and their definitions, they are ultimately neglecting to teach the *Catholic Social Teachings*. These include (1) human dignity with rights to live in a united family, and a moral environment with free speech, and the right to participate in society and government, (2) the common good where individuals achieve the conditions that make it possible for them to reach their full potential as persons, (3) subsidiarity where every group or body in society has the freedom and means to do what it can best for itself without its activity being taken over by a higher body, and (4) solidarity where people live in union with one another, supporting one another, and committed to the common good (Cummings, 2015). Instead, they are teaching that God's perfect image is a heterosexual world and if one cannot conform to this then they cannot be accepted.

### **2.3 Homophobic Bullying**

This section explores the meaning, act, and effects of homophobic bullying on youth. It also addresses effective preventative and responsive measures to homophobic bullying.

#### **2.3.1 What Does it Mean?**

Incidents of bullying stem from an imbalance of power; where a victim is repeatedly harassed, picked on (i.e., verbally, physically, mentally), and/or excluded by an individual or group of people who believe to be superior to the targeted victim. While still a form of bullying, homophobic bullying differs in its focus on people identifying within the LGBTIQ+ community. In the case of homophobic bullying, this imbalance of power is produced through homophobia, which Wright et al., (1999) defines as holding negative beliefs, attitudes, stereotypes, and behaviours towards sexual minorities or gender non-conforming individuals (as cited by Collier, Bos & Sandofrt, 2013; Hong & Garbarino, 2012).

### **2.3.2 Homophobic Bullying in Practice**

According to Basile et al., (2009) some examples of homophobic bullying include teasing, social exclusion, threats of physical violence and physical assaults, all of which are based on the perceived or actual sexual orientation of a victim (as cited by Hong & Garbarino). Furthermore, gender diversity has been assessed as a risk factor for general types of peer victimization such as being called names or excluded (Collier et al., 2013). Although homophobic bullying and victimization is typically aimed at individuals identifying as LGBTIQ+ members, Chambers et al., (2004) and Plummer (2001) explain that in school settings, homophobic insults are still prevalent towards individuals who are perceived as LGBTIQ+ or perceived to be socially, physically or intellectually “different” (as cited by Collier et al., 2013). It is noteworthy that homophobic bullying affects more than just those who identify as LGBTIQ+. Children and adolescents are affected by homophobic bullying for carrying characteristics that are generalized as being “homosexual” or gender diverse. Thus, along with individuals who are gender diverse, individuals who identify as heterosexual may still be affected by homophobic actions such as negative slurs, name-calling, social exclusion, isolation and feelings of inferiority. However, homophobic victimization and bullying is “generally associated more strongly with negative health outcomes in LGBTIQ+ adolescents as opposed to heterosexual adolescents” (Collier et al., 2013, p. 366).

In addition to looking at the targets of homophobic bullying, it is important to look at the number of reported students affected by it. A biannual National School Climate survey (2005) conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network [GLSEN] demonstrates alarming rates of LGBTIQ+ middle and high school students being subjected to bullying and harassment (as cited by Miller, 2008). Specifically, in 2015, the GLSEN reported that three-

fourths of the respondents reported hearing frequent derogatory name-calling such as “faggot” and “dyke” at school, while close to 90 per cent of the respondents were regularly subjected to hearing the expressions “that’s so gay” and “you’re so gay” in a way that indicates the targeted individual or idea as inferior or unworthy of consideration (as cited by Miller, 2008). According to the 2009 National School Climate Survey, Kosciw et al., (2010) reported that 90 percent of sexual minority youth had reportedly been verbally harassed, while 4 in 10 students reported being physically harassed due to their sexual orientation (as cited by Hong & Garbarino, 2012). The most recent National School Climate Survey (2014) shows some minor improvements, however, the reports still remain quite hostile (GLSEN, 2014). For instance, this survey reports that in the past year, thirty-three percent of LGBTIQ+ students were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) because of their sexual orientation and 23 percent because of their gender expression; 17 percent were physically assaulted (e.g., punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) because of their sexual orientation and 11 percent because of their gender expression; and sixty-five percent of LGBTIQ+ students frequently heard homophobic remarks such as “dyke” or “faggot” (GLSEN, 2014).

Despite these reports, many people are against any aspect of inclusion in schools that “promotes the gay agenda” (Miller, 2008). This is evident in a survey conducted by Advocates for Children, Inc. [AFCI] (2005) where it is reported in a survey of LGBTIQ+ students in New York schools, 70 percent reported being harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (as cited by Birkett et al., 2009). Of these 70 percent, AFCI (2005) found that 59 percent reported that school personnel were both present during the reported harassment and did not assist in any way (as cited by Birkett et al., 2009). As a result, many LGBTIQ+ youth are being bullied while also being denied any support and protection from their school and its staff,

bringing them to face the experience of feeling isolated and singularly different from their surrounding peers (Miller, 2008).

### **2.3.3 Effects of Homophobic Bullying on Students**

With school being one of the most salient and influential environments for children (Birkett et al., 2009), it has the potential to either benefit or do much harm to its students. Barker et al., (2001) and Ringeisen et al., (2003) report a link between school contextual factors and children's mental health, achievement, self-concept, and ability to form social relationships (Birkett et al., 2009). More specifically, the high levels of stress that come from having to come to terms with one's own sexuality in early adolescence while simultaneously negotiating one's school environment's heterosexism and homophobia can place many LGBTIQ+ youth at risk for depression, suicide, drug use, and school problems (Elliot & Kilpatrick, 1994; Mufoz-Plazaa et al., 2002; Treadway & Yoakam, 1993, as cited by Birkett et al., 2009, p. 989-990).

In fact, LGBTIQ+ and questioning adolescents have reported experiencing more depressive and suicidal feelings, and more alcohol and marijuana use than their heterosexual counterparts (Collier et al., 2013, p. 366). This is evident in a study by D'Augelli and Hershberger (1993), which found that from a sample of LGBTIQ+ youth, 41 percent of males and 28 percent of females reported high instances of depression (as cited by Birkett et al., 2009). According to a study conducted by Weinberg et al., (1998) it was found that in only 3 months, 63 percent of LGBTIQ+ youth had used alcohol compared to the 51 percent of heterosexual youth, and 33 percent of LGBTIQ+ youth had used marijuana versus the 22 percent of heterosexual youth (as cited by Birkett et al., 2009). Furthermore, Safe Schools for Transgender and Gender Diverse Students [SSFTGDS] (2014) report that the experiences transgender students have at school also affect their wellbeing as adults. For instance, Greytak, Kaschw & Diaz (2009) report

that harassment and assault lead to anxiety about school, which then leads to missing days of school and later affects academic development (as cited by Safe Schools for Transgender and Gender Diverse Students [SSFTGDS], 2014).

In more extreme cases, many LGBTIQ+ youth resort to suicide, as they are 4 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2009, as cited by Egale, 2015). Egale (2015) reports that, 33% of LGBTIQ+ youth have attempted suicide in comparison to 7% of youth in general, illustrating that the relationship between suicide and homophobic bullying is stronger for LGBTIQ+ youth than it is for their heterosexual peers (Saewyc, 2007; Kim & Leventhal, 2008).

The many barriers that LGBTIQ+ youth consistently face put them at risk for “low self-esteem, parental rejection, peer abuse, substance abuse, dropping out of school, homelessness, unsafe sexual behaviour, prostitution, self-injury and suicide” (Solomon & Russell, 2004, p. 2). For such reasons, it can be agreed with Horn et al., (2009) that homophobic bullying is of serious concern for parents, teachers and school officials (as cited by Hong & Garbarino, 2012).

#### **2.3.4 Effective Responses to Homophobic Bullying**

A positive school climate is very important for levels of student depression, suicide, alcohol and marijuana use, truancy and student achievement (Birkett et al., 2009). It was found that these levels are lowest in all children (regardless of sexual orientation) when in a positive school climate and in the absence of homophobic teasing (Birkett et al., 2009). This suggests that low levels of homophobic teasing result in more positive school climates, which then have the potential to reduce the prevalence of negative outcomes in all students, including those identifying as LGBTIQ+ (Birkett et al., 2009).

Bullying prevention and intervention programs need to be inclusive of addressing homophobic bullying in schools in order to create a positive school climate (Hong & Garbarino, 2012). Garbarino and deLara (2002) further explain that this can be done by reducing or diminishing tolerance for homophobia and prejudice among students through various peer groups (as cited by Hong & Garbarino, 2012). By creating a school environment where homophobic teasing is not tolerated, it can serve as an important intervention for improving the psychological outcomes for *all* students (Birkett et al., 2009).

*Preventative Measures Over Responsive Measures.*

While responsive actions to homophobic bullying are necessary, taking preventative measures is critical for educators to be able to create a diverse community where everyone feels safe and welcomed through a strong sense of belonging. Athansases (1996), Moita-Lopes (2006) and Swartz (2003) claim that “the presentation of LGBTIQ+ themed literature and lessons may help build tolerance and acceptance among children and in turn help reduce bullying and abuse” (as cited in Flores, 2012, p. 190). Johnson (2010) suggests re-examining “school dress codes that mandate different attire for males and females to prevent the reinforcement of gender-role conformity and heteronormativity” (as cited by Hong & Garbarino, 2012, p. 280). Flores (2012) shares some of Van Wormer and McKinney’s (2003) suggestions which are (1) collaboratively creating classroom rules with students that reflect inclusive wording, (2) inviting LGBTIQ+ people into the classroom to discuss their jobs and family lives to students, and (3) organizing informal classroom discussions that allow time for eradicating myths and accurately discussing LGBTIQ+ people and culture (classroom discussions can also be held about other social groups such as indigenous peoples or homeless people).

Making changes to school policies and curriculum are necessary for working towards the creation of positive school climates. This is because as Eccles et al., (1993) explain, if a classroom does not fit the needs of the children within it [i.e., LGBTIQ+ students], academic and social difficulties may follow (as cited by Birkett et al., 2009).

## **2.4 Educator Attitudes, Actions and their Consequential Influences on Students**

This section addresses ways in which educator attitudes and beliefs can influence their actions, which can then affect the influence they have on their students.

### **2.4.1 Attitudes and Beliefs About LGBTIQ+ Themes in the Classroom**

Attitudes often stem from one's beliefs and serve to be very powerful in determining individual choices and actions. Educators in particular, are driven by their attitudes when it comes to making decisions about what to teach and how to teach it. While some teachers wish to teach tolerance and inclusivity towards sexual orientation, other teachers hold a distorted understanding of what it means to address LGBTIQ+ themes within the classroom and as a result, avoid it (Flores, 2012; Hernandez, 2013). In combination with objections from religious groups and misconceptions about LGBTIQ+ theme inclusion (e.g., not being considered school issues, being undeserving of attention in schools, being associated with sex education) educators hold fears about job security, parental opposition and fears about how students may change their perceptions of them (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007 & Whittingham and Rickman 2007, as cited by Flores, 2008; Hanlon, 2009, as cited by Hernandez, 2013). O'Connell et al., (2010) address that despite being in the forefront of promoting safe school climates for LGBTIQ+ students, some educators respond negatively toward these students due to their lack of comfort and knowledge regarding sexuality issues in schools (as cited by Hong & Garbarino, 2012).

In addition to having mixed attitudes towards LGBTIQ+ themes in schools, there are also evident attitudes that interfere with educator intervention with incidences of bullying in schools. Atlas and Pepler (1998), and Craig and Pepler (1997) state that some educators' explanations for their lack of intervention include uncertainty about how to respond to bullying, not witnessing the actual incident, and carrying the belief that bullying is a typical childhood behaviour that does not require any serious ramifications (as cited by Mischna, Scarcello, Pepler and Wiener, 2005). This lack of educator intervention holds serious consequences such as the lack of creating a safe environment and negative affects on student academic achievement. Specifically, the National School Climate Survey (2014) reports that "LGBTIQ+ students who had 11 or more supportive staff at their school were less likely to feel unsafe than students with no supportive staff (36 percent vs. 74 percent) and had higher GPAs (3.3 vs. 2.8)" (GSLEN, 2014). While the reported effects on students are significant, the amount of supportive teachers in schools are minimal where only 39 percent of LGBTIQ+ students could identify 11 or more supportive staff (GSLEN, 2014).

#### **2.4.2 Lack of Teacher Intervention With Incidents of Bullying**

With regards to homophobic bullying, it becomes evident why there is a lack of teacher intervention. In the face of misconceptions and disapprovals towards LGBTIQ+ themes in the classroom, teachers may be lacking confidence in being able to address these issues effectively with political correctness. Callaghan (2012) reports that in recent years, teacher candidates have begun to receive anti-homophobia education where they learn to draw upon age-appropriate, government-approved and school district-approved curricular resources that offer information about non-heterosexual families, LGBTIQ+ role models, the advancement of same-sex legal rights in Canada, and how to reduce homophobic bullying in schools. While such training could

serve to be effective for future educators implementing LGBTIQ+ themes in the classroom, it becomes ineffective for Catholic educators through its negligence for teaching how to address ideological clashes between anti-homophobia education and religion education (Callaghan, 2012).

### **2.4.3 Catholic Educators and Their Contradicting Roles**

A main dilemma for Catholic educators is that they have two contradicting roles. First, they are required to present and maintain the official Catholic teachings due to their responsibility to curricular content (McDonough, 2013) so that each of their students attain the Catholic Graduate Expectations (Institute for Catholic Educators [ICE], 2015). Secondly, Catholic educators are required to respect the human rights of every student under the *Charter* and the *OHRC*. Perhaps Catholic schools should focus on the *Catholic Social Teachings* (i.e., human dignity, the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity) (Cummings, 2013) in a positive light and use these to embrace the diversity that is prevalent in Catholic schools and among people who are of Catholic faith. Changes should be made to the *Constitution Act* (1867) to change the landscape of Catholic education in a way that will help it align with the *Charter*. As Grace and Wells (2005) put it, while it is the Catholic school system's right to teach to their religious principles (under Section 93), "how far can the Catholic church go before Canadians say stop in the name of democratic principles that protect individual rights?"

### **2.5 Conclusion**

In this literature review, I looked at research on Catholic schools and sexual orientation, sensitive and controversial issues, homophobic bullying, and educator roles and attitudes towards homophobic bullying and LGBTIQ+ themes within the classroom. This review illustrates the extent that attention has been paid to homophobic bullying, LGBTIQ+ themes in the elementary

classroom, Catholicism's governing principals with regards to sexual orientation and homosexuality, the conflicting *Charter* and *Constitution Act* laws, and educator attitudes for incorporating these themes in the Catholic elementary school system. This raises questions about how Catholic educators can find a balance between two conflicting government laws, to meet the human rights of every student they encounter and to effectively respond to homophobic bullying without clashing with their Catholic faith. In light of this, the purpose of my research is to learn how a sample of Catholic educators create opportunities for students to learn about sexual and gender diversity in ways that speak to, rather than discard their Catholic faith, without excluding or shaming individuals who do not conform to heterosexual norms. I propose to research this so that educators in all school contexts can learn how to create safe school spaces for every individual that enters.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

#### **3.0 Introduction**

In this chapter I explain the research methodology, identify the various methodological decisions I have made, and explain my rationale for these choices, given the research purpose and questions. I begin by discussing the research approach and procedure, and then describe the main instrument of data collection. Next, I identify the participants of the study, listing the sampling criteria, describing the sampling procedures, and providing some information on the participants. I then describe how I have analyzed the data, before recognizing relevant ethical issues that have been considered and addressed. Lastly, I highlight and acknowledge some of the methodological limitations and strengths of this study.

### **3.1 Research Approach and Procedures**

This study uses a qualitative research study approach, involving a literature review and semi-structured interviews with three educators. The qualitative research approach begins with assumptions, a worldview, and the possible use of a theoretical lens, to then study research problems that are ascribed by individuals or groups to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2007). It uses an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in natural settings, and data analysis that establishes patterns or themes (Creswell, 2007). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) explain a key to this approach, which is for researchers to have an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world so that they can study things in their natural settings and then attempt to make sense of, or interpret various phenomena (as cited by Creswell, 2007).

Unlike quantitative research that takes place in a laboratory and eliminates the environment as a potential intervening variable, qualitative research takes place in the participants' natural environments where they often experience the research problem first hand (Calafati, 2013; Creswell, 2007; Donalek & Solldwisch, 2004). This provides researchers with an insight into the research problem through the participants' perspectives, allowing researchers to reflect on the underlying assumptions throughout the existing literature (Bosacki, Marini & Dane, 2006). This can serve as extremely valuable information as it cannot be learned through quantitative research where producing generalizable results is the ultimate goal (Marshall, 1996). Instead, the qualitative approach aims to provide clarification and understanding of complex psychosocial issues, which then aids in answering humanistic "how" and "why" questions (Marshall, 1996).

By using a qualitative approach, I was able to learn how a sample of Catholic educators teach to LGBTIQ+ themes in the Catholic school context, in spite of the contradicting laws

between the *1867 Constitution Act* and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. I also gained a deeper insight into a sample of Catholic teachers' views on their roles and responsibilities for intervening with, and preventing homophobic bullying by using education as a tool for teaching inclusivity, empathy and acceptance of all people. This then allowed for me to use multiple educator perspectives and experiences to aid in developing my own pedagogical strategies with regards to my future teaching practices. These gains highlight the significance of using a qualitative research study approach for this study.

### **3.2 Instruments of Data Collection**

This study gathers information from various locations, such as recent literature and research documents, and the conduction of semi-structured interviews with three Catholic educators. While Merriam (2002) explains that the three most common sources of data for qualitative research studies are interviews, observations and documents, this study uses the semi-structured interview protocol as its primary data collection instrument and previously reviewed documents (e.g., *Charter, 1867 Constitution Act*, literature review findings) as support (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Merriam, 2002). This serves to be beneficial as use of multiple methods can improve the validity of the findings (Merriam, 2002).

Semi-structured interviews are structured through their requirement of specific information from its participants, and are flexible as they are guided by a list of open-ended questions or issues to be explored (Merriam, 2002). This process served as a form of conversation to address my main and subsidiary research questions (Savenye & Robinson, 2005). Due to the semi-flexible nature of this interview, the order of the questions and the exact wording was tentatively determined ahead of time for this study, which allowed for an open-

ended interview experience, where participants' individual experiences and perspectives dictated the nature of, and findings from each interview (Merriam, 2002).

For the purpose of this study, each semi-structured interview was scheduled in advance at a designated time and location, they were all one-on-one (on the phone, due to the lacking proximity of participants to researcher) and each interview ranged from 45-60 minutes long (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). I organized my interview protocol (Appendix B) into 5 sections, beginning with each participant's background information, followed by questions about teaching perspectives and beliefs with regards using education as a tool to teach inclusivity, empathy and acceptance for all people. Next I asked questions about their past and current teaching practices and experiences with educating students about LGBTIQ+ themes, as well as about the supports and challenges they have encountered while doing this in a Catholic school context. To conclude, I asked each participant for their suggested next steps for Catholic educators who share these same pedagogical interests. These interviews were audio-recorded for subsequent transcription and data analysis (Bosacki et al., 2006). Finally, the use of semi-structured interviews allowed for me to "listen to the participants, study their perceptions and experiences, and discover their reality," which provided me with further insight into my research questions (Calafati, 2013, p. 34).

### **3.3 Participants**

A critical step in any research project is determining a specific study sample to ensure that the interview process is practical, efficient and ethical (Marshall, 1996). My sample of participants were fairly homogeneous, shared critical similarities related to my main research question, and fit the sampling criteria stated below (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Throughout this section, I address all methodological decisions related to the research

participants by reviewing the sampling criteria established for participant recruitment, and reviewing a range of avenues for possible educator recruitment.

### **3.3.1 Sampling criteria**

All participants must fit the following criteria:

1. Educators will teach or have at least 5 years experience teaching in the Catholic school system (K-Grade 12)
2. Educators will be self-described LGBTIQ+ allies/supporters
3. Educators will be advocates and leaders in the area of teaching for social justice and equity (specifically LGBTIQ+) [and will actively carry this out in their practices]
4. Educators will have experience teaching gender and sexual diversity in a Catholic school context for a minimum of 5 years
5. Educators will have experience teaching about gender and sexual diversity in ways that align with the Catholic faith and values

In order to address my main and subsidiary research questions, it was ideal that the selected educators had a minimum of 5 years working in the Catholic education system. While this was not a crucial sampling criteria, it was important because it allowed for me to hear about a vast array of experiences with different groups of peers, colleagues, and students and their families, which provided me with higher quality findings. With regards to the rest of the criteria, it was important that these educators were Catholic and working (or had experience working) in the Catholic education system because I wanted to learn about teaching to LGBTIQ+ themes in the Catholic school context. They had to be active LGBTIQ+ allies and supporters in order to commit time and energy to supporting the social group through means of education. These educators also had to be advocates for teaching social justice education and have experience

teaching to LGBTIQ+ themes in their Catholic classrooms in order to speak about actively implementing these themes throughout different aspects of the curriculum.

Lastly, these educators needed to have experience teaching about gender and sexual diversity in ways that align with the Catholic faith and values because I wanted to learn how these teachers are able to teach about gender and sexual diversity in spite of the contradicting laws where the *1867 Constitution Act* supports Catholicism's anti-homosexual views in Catholic schools and Section 15 (1) of the *Charter* provides protection against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation.

### **3.3.2 Participant Recruitment**

The selection sampling approaches that I took were convenience and purposeful sampling approaches. Convenience sampling is when researchers select the most accessible subjects (Marshall, 1996). While it is the least rigorous technique, and the least costly in terms of time, effort, and money, it may result in poor quality data and lack intellectual credibility (Marshall, 1996). I used convenience sampling specifically in the process of recruiting participants, where I contacted my existing contacts and networks first (via social media and personal communication) as potential participants.

Purposeful sampling requires researchers to actively select the most productive sample to answer the research question (Marshall, 1996). This is done by developing a framework of the variables that may influence the individual's contribution, and is based on the researcher's practical knowledge of the research area, relevant literature and the study's own findings (Marshall, 1996). This often results in a 'richer' sample from which the most information can be learned (Merriam, 2002) and allows the opportunity for a snowball sample where subjects who are contacted first may be able to recommend other potential participants for the study (Marshall,

1996). I used purposeful sampling specifically through use of my practical knowledge on the research area, in-depth review of relevant literature and careful selection of a small sample of participants who best adhere to the stated sampling criteria (Marshall, 1996). The combination of convenience and purposeful sampling allowed for me to use various avenues for recruiting participants. These included; personal communication, social media, researching social groups and blogs online that support LGBTIQ+ communities, and contacting past educators, colleagues and authors personally.

### **3.3.3 Participant Biographies**

*Participant #1.* Theo Warden (pseudonym) is a Catholic teacher with an educational background in Religious Studies and a Master of Peace and Conflict studies. He has taught for eighteen years at the elementary school level and fourteen years at the secondary school level. Over the span of his career, he has taught students ranging from Grades 3 to 12. He currently works at a Catholic Secondary school, where he teaches various courses such as social justice, religion, and world religions. He also runs a social justice club, coaches the girls' basketball team and has organized international trips in the past that focus on poverty issues through a justice lens. Theo's commitment and preparation for working as a leader in the realm of social justice education was sparked when he worked at a youth leadership camp for underprivileged children that was shut down for sexual orientation based discriminatory reasons. The closing of this camp led to the development of a new youth leadership camp that he co-created and has been running for eight years. Theo claims that this experience led him to developing a Liberal left-wing view of the church and the Catholic faith. This has put him on a learning curve that he claims has changed his classroom routines to ensure the implementation of LGBTIQ+ perspectives and the production of a safe and inclusive learning environment.

***Participant #2.*** Ryan Smithond (pseudonym) has been teaching for seven years and has had various long term occasional positions in Special Education, and Grades 1, 2, 6 and 7. Additional roles that he fulfills in his school are a basketball coach, and a facilitator of the social justice and Pure Pals group. He identifies as Catholic and grew up in the Catholic school system, leading him to teach in Catholic schools. Ryan states that one side of his family was always left-wing Catholic and very involved in social justice and supporting their local “LGB” community. He also has a family member that came out as gay when Ryan was 2 years old, allowing for many early exposures to sexual and gender diversity. An experience that contributed to Ryan’s commitment and preparation for working as a leader in the realm of social justice education was the time he spent working at an all boys camp. At this camp, many individuals identified on the LGBT spectrum, which helped him to see how important it is for inequalities to be stood up against. This led to his implementation of social justice education in his own classroom.

***Participant #3.*** Samantha Lurpe (pseudonym) is a Catholic secondary school teacher who has been teaching for twelve years. Her current position is the Theology department head and she has previously taught courses in French, leadership, world religions, theology, English, equity and social justice, ESL and writers craft. Her educational background consists of a university minor in Women’s Studies, a Masters degree in Spiritual Care and Psychotherapy, and various university level courses such as World Religions. On a personal level, Samantha is a Yoga instructor and places a large emphasis on the importance of developing the self in the holistic approach. These experiences have contributed to the development of Samantha’s commitment and preparation for working as a leader in the realm of social justice education. Some ways that Samantha has carried out this commitment is through leading her school’s social justice club, leading 5 international “diversity trips” [also known as mission trips], and by

working as an active union member for justice in the workplace. In her teaching space, Samantha makes it very clear that she strives to have a safe learning environment through her placement of a *Safe Space* rainbow sticker on her door as well as a *coexist* sign which has multi-faith symbols. She states that with this, she sends out a message that every individual is included regardless of their ethnicity, orientation and/or any other individual marker.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

The process of data collection and analysis occur concurrently in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Qualitative studies often rely on inductive reasoning processes to interpret and structure various meanings that can be derived from data (Thorne, 2015). Unlike deductive reasoning that tests hypotheses through confirmation or negation, inductive reasoning uses data to generate ideas and hypotheses (Thorne, 2015). Throughout the process of data analysis, I use inductive reasoning by using the data I have collected from literature and interview conceptions to interpret how Catholic educators think and feel about teaching LGBTIQ+ themes in the Catholic school context to try and reduce homophobic bullying (Thorne, 2015).

DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) explain a “template approach” where collected data is sorted into segments with similar content and then placed into separate categories for a final distillation into major themes. I draw on this procedure for my data analysis through transcribing my interviews and purposefully coding the data as it relates to my research questions. I also pay attention to “null data,” which includes any information that the participants did not speak to. This is important as it provides insight into what the participants are either uncomfortable speaking about or find to be unworthy of talking to. This can allow for further analysis of collected data.

### **3.5 Ethical Review Procedures**

Four ethical issues directly associated with the interview process are decreasing the risk of unforeseen harm, safeguarding participants' information, appropriately informing participants about the study and decreasing the risk of exploitation (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). In order to avoid these issues and ensure that participants are not at risk, the following procedures will be followed.

All selected participants voluntarily agreed to participate and received ample information about the research prior to them making their decision. Participants received a letter of consent (approved by the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board) that they signed before participating in the research (Appendix A). This letter of consent explicitly outlined the purpose of the research and the topic being investigated. It ensured participant anonymity through use of pseudonyms, which is crucial in the interview process as the information being shared may jeopardize the participants' positions in the education system (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This letter of consent also informed participants that the interview would be recorded, that they had the right to refuse to answer any questions and that they could withdraw from the process at any given point without any consequences.

DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) explain that it is important for the researcher to rapidly develop a positive relationship during interviews. Thus, to increase the levels of comfort for participants, I built rapport with them through trust and respect for each participant and the information they chose to share (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). I also ensured that the time and location of each interview was decided by each participant, prior to the interview, and that each participant received a short list of sample questions one week ahead of time.

Each participant was also provided with the contact information of myself, and my course instructor, Dr. Angela Macdonald-Vemic, and were also be able to request a copy of the final product. I stored all data on a password-protected computer that can only be accessed by my course instructor and myself. I will also destroy all collected information 5 years after conducting the interviews. There are no known risks involved with participation.

### **3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths**

In qualitative research, the researcher plays the key, interpretative role of a ‘human instrument,’ which may result in biases and shortcomings in data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2002). Due to the ethical parameters that I had approval for, I was unable to interview anyone that is not an educator, limiting me to hearing only from educators’ standpoints. Another limitation is the small sample of participants and the fact that all collected data was based on participant perception, rather than on their perceptions and my own observations of their actual practices. My interpretation of the data may also contain bias, due to my current experiences, position as a teacher candidate and possible assumptions I may have made, which could have affected how the interview process developed and how the data was interpreted (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Additionally, while this research is focused on the implementation of LGBTIQ+ themes in a Catholic context, Catholicism’s governing policies may have limited the participants to implement such themes to the extent in which they desired, resulting in data that is reflective of their limited abilities, rather than their preferred actions.

Although these interviews provided me with more insight into my research question, they did not allow for me to generalize the experiences of all Catholic educators teaching to LGBTIQ+ themes in a Catholic school context. As a result of these subjectivities, it is important that I am able to identify and monitor the ways in which these factors may have influenced the

collection and interpretation of data (Merriam, 2002). It is also important that I remained aware of these limitations and subjectivities so that I was able to interpret the findings with caution (Bosacki et al., 2006) to increase the validity of my findings and interpretations.

DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) state that in-depth interviews can provide rich and detailed information about the experiences of participants. By interviewing three educators about teaching to LGBTIQ+ themes in a Catholic school context to reduce homophobic bullying, I was able to yield the most relevant information (Merriam, 2002). Another strength in the selected method of data collection and analysis is that they are simultaneous in qualitative research (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Merriam, 2002). This allowed for me to make any necessary adjustments along the way, such as redirecting data collection and testing emerging concepts, themes and categories against subsequent data (Merriam, 2002). Lastly, the product of qualitative inquiry is richly descriptive as it includes descriptions of the context and participants involved, as well as provides data in the form of quotes from documents and participant interviews (Merriam, 2002). This serves to support the study's findings using the descriptive nature of qualitative research (Merriam, 2002).

### **3.7 Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter I discussed the research methodology. I began with a discussion and analysis of the qualitative research approach and procedure, and its significance to this particular study. Next I described the instruments of data collection, and identified semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data collection. After discussing the benefits of semi-structured interviews, I discussed the participants of this study. More specifically, I addressed the sampling criteria and provided a rationale for each one. I then addressed how I used convenience and purposeful sampling to recruit participants through personal

communication, social media, researching social groups and blogs online that support LGBTIQ+ communities, and contacting past educators, colleagues and authors personally. I also described how I used a combination of convenience and purposeful sampling to emphasize the richness and depth of data collection. I continued by describing how I analyzed the data, through examination of individual interviews and then looking for common themes and statements throughout. Then I discussed ethical issues such as consent, anonymity, the right to withdraw and data storage, and mentioned the methods I used to ensure participants were aware of their rights and felt comfortable throughout the process. Lastly, I reported on the strengths and limitations of the methodologies used in this study. In the next chapter, I report on the findings of the research.

## **Chapter 4: Research Findings**

### **4.0 Introduction**

This chapter explores the findings that have emerged from the data analysis of three research interviews. All questions and analyses were based on my main research question: How do a sample of Catholic educators create opportunities for students to learn about sexual and gender diversity in ways that speak to, rather than discard their Catholic faith, without excluding or shaming individuals who do not conform to heterosexual norms? Throughout this discussion, I make connections between participants' experiences and the literature review in Chapter 2. All findings have been organized into the following main themes:

- 4.1 Participants have recognized personal experiences and learning curves that have contributed to their development and commitment to teaching gender and sexual diversity.

4.2 Participants have identified levels of support from colleagues and administrators, Catholicism's policies and governing beliefs, and various resources as supports and challenges that have contributed to teaching gender and sexual diversity.

4.3 Participants have experienced various responses from administrators, colleagues and parents that have impacted their teaching practices.

4.4 Participants have described a range of action-based and emotional outcomes from their students after teaching about gender and sexual diversity.

Each main theme has three sub-themes that elaborate on specific experiences, strategies and beliefs as mentioned by the participants. In discussing each theme, I begin by describing what the theme is. Then I report the corresponding data, and make connections to the existing literature. To conclude, I summarize my findings and make recommendations for next steps.

#### **4.1 Participants Have Recognized Personal Experiences and Learning Curves That Have Contributed to Their Development and Commitment to Teaching Gender and Sexual Diversity**

All three participants expressed that their development and commitment to teaching gender and sexual diversity stemmed from personal experiences in their own lives. All expressed that they experienced exposure to a variety of beliefs and attitudes, but only one indicated that their religious upbringing was the channel for that exposure. Participants also indicated that their own feelings of compassion contributed to their ongoing commitment to teaching gender and sexual diversity. As a result of this discussion, I hope to shed light on what sexual and gender diversity education means to these participants.

#### **4.1.1 Participants have recognized their own religious upbringing as a contributor to their developed commitment to teaching gender and sexual diversity.**

Both Theo and Samantha described their upbringing as being predominantly Catholic to the point of them feeling as though they were raised in a “conservative bubble.” More specifically, Theo claimed to have spent a total of fifty years exclusively in the Catholic school system (both as a student and a teacher), and only began to experience and interact with diverse connections outside of the Catholic school system in the past decade. Similarly, Samantha grew up in the Catholic school system, has taught only in the Canadian Catholic school system and began to gain exposures to diverse experiences through her post-secondary and graduate schooling. Samantha’s role as a teacher has also allowed her to interact with the diverse students and staff around her, exposing her to their personal experiences, which she claimed to be the best form of education. Theo and Samantha’s sheltered upbringings could be a result of the Catholic school system’s use of denominational education as a vehicle to impose and maintain Catholic traditions (Grace & Wells, 2005). Such an approach results in the privatizing of sensitive topics such as LGBTIQ+ issues (Grace & Wells, 2005), possibly explaining how and why Theo and Samantha did not gain exposure to diverse people and experiences until their early to late adulthoods.

Contrarily, Ryan described his upbringing as being less sheltered as a result of being exposed at an early age to such truths as his uncle being gay. His family always identified as being “left-wing Catholic,” as they openly and actively supported their nearby “LGB” community. While Ryan attended the publicly funded Catholic school system growing up, his family’s left-wing actions have contributed to his currently open mentality and view of the Catholic faith being based in social justice. Blackburn (2005) and Manning (2000) explain that

introducing multicultural education topics to young students can benefit them by providing them with experiences that advocate positive feelings towards themselves, others and their diverse surroundings (as cited in Flores, 2012), which may suggest how Ryan was able to grow up practicing Catholicism, without adopting exclusive and closed-minded attitudes.

#### **4.1.2 Participants have recognized their own personal range of diverse exposures and experiences in their adulthood as a contributor to their developed commitment to teaching gender and sexual diversity.**

As part of being able to use diverse exposures and experiences to help influence their teaching practices, participants have first acknowledged themselves as active, lifelong learners. Specifically, Theo labelled himself as a “lifelong slow learner” due to his experiences and exposures in his later life that have led him to hold a left-wing view of his faith, challenge his own traditional thinking and act accordingly in his recent teaching practices. Samantha stated that she views herself as having the responsibility to unlearn ideas that are prevalent in her parents’ conservative practices and beliefs, which made up a large part of her own background. Ryan exemplified his view of himself as a lifelong learner through his emphasis on having an open mind to different points of view and beliefs so that he can develop a deeper understanding with each new exposure and experience.

This view of lifelong learning has allowed each participant to be mindful of their diverse exposures and experiences, and their consequent actions in the classroom. For instance, after learning that different people identify with different gender pronouns, Theo incorporated gender pronoun checks as part of his classroom routine because he believes that in order to have an inclusive classroom, students need to first be able to view individual differences as “normal,” and diversity as a “good thing.” Moreover, Samantha constantly reviews her own vocabulary and

the use of terms and phrases often used by her generation (and older) because of the judgmental and divisive nature they hold. She also explained the impact vocabulary can have on her own students such as low achievement, low self-concept and the lacking ability to form social relationships (Barker et al., 2009; Ringeisen et al., 2003; Birkett et al., 2009). Such teacher actions are also critical in developing a positive school climate, which is crucial for having low levels of student depression, suicide, alcohol and marijuana use, truancy and student achievement (Birkett et al., 2009).

#### **4.1.3 Participants have acknowledged their own feelings of compassion as a contributor to their developed commitment to teaching gender and sexual diversity.**

Ryan expressed that the Catholic faith is a place where everyone is accepted and everyone feels that they have a right to be there, no matter who they are, and as a practicing Catholic, he believes that inequality is something he needs to stand up against. This concept drives Ryan to educate beyond the curriculum's restrictive boundaries as a reactive measure to instances of homophobic bullying. More specifically, Ryan does this by making use of teachable moments that arise on a daily basis. For example, in response to hearing a student say a homophobic slur, he begins by firstly asking the students if their actions are appropriate or if they know what their words mean. He then explains to students what their actions/words mean, makes the incident personal by expressing to his students "I find that insulting", uses personal stories from when he was the same age as his students, and lastly makes connections between student actions and the negative effects they can have on other people.

Theo explained that he integrates themes of gender and sexual diversity into his teaching routine through use of current events and stories of people from different social groups. He expressed that the level of influence he gained from people he has met in the past five to ten years

has exposed him to experiences such as being an indirect victim of discrimination (where a Catholic camp he was part of was shut down because a member at the camp was openly gay). Such experiences brought Theo back to his Masters of Peace and Conflict studies, and the efforts that were put forward (to open a new camp) by he and 6 other members of the original camp that was shut down. This created a “spirit of legitimate inclusion” and inspired him to incorporate such an approach and attitude into his own classroom.

Samantha explained that she believes that teaching about gender and sexual diversity can provide students who can often be marginalized with a space where they can feel open, accepted and able to express themselves. During a conversation Samantha had with a transgender student, the student explained to her that in the youth group for LGBT youth that he and 19 others attend, he is the only person with a supportive family. She exclaimed that when considering these statistics, providing students with a safe space (e.g., in the school) can be the difference between life and death for some students, which serves as a true purpose for her to continue implementing these practices in her teaching.

When teachers act based on their own feelings and beliefs, they seem to be more passionate about the approaches they take, and seem as though they are better able to understand the outcomes of their students. The actions mentioned by all three participants were driven by their own feelings of compassion, and serve to aid students in developing empathy and compassion for others. This is to combat a risk Swartz (2003) describes, that without accurate knowledge, children resort to theorizing about sexuality, sexual identity, gender roles and sexual orientation based on their family, friends, religion, media and other social and cultural influences, which can potentially result in children developing theories that are governed by fear and negative attitudes (as cited in Flores, 2012). This also aligns with the *Accepting Schools Act (Bill 13)*

(2012), which requires all school boards to implement policies that combat bullying and promote a positive school climate by being inclusive and accepting of all pupils regardless of sex or sexual orientation.

#### **4.2 Participants Have Identified Levels of Support From Colleagues and Administrators, Catholicism's Policies and Governing Beliefs, and Various Resources as Supports and Challenges That Have Contributed to Teaching Gender and Sexual Diversity**

Participants shared various supports and challenges that have influenced the extent of which they were able to implement gender and sexual diversity topics in their daily teaching practices. Two participants shared that administrative and collegial support highly influenced their actions and comfort levels with what they were teaching, while one participant explained that while it helps to have this type of support, it was no longer critical for him to teach about gender and sexual diversity. All participants have relied on Catholic policies and beliefs, as well as personal, school related and government supported resources to support them in this work. As a result of this discussion, I intend to specify various supports or challenges for teachers who wish to teach about gender and sexual diversity in Catholic schools.

##### **4.2.1 Participants receive varying levels of support from colleagues and administration in teaching gender and sexual diversity.**

Both Ryan and Samantha shared experiences where the level of support from colleagues and administration supported them in teaching gender and sexual diversity. Ryan claimed that in his past experiences he has received more support from colleagues than from administration. However, he stated that support from colleagues is sometimes uncommon because he does not often share details about what he is doing in his classroom. Part of his reason for this is that it is often difficult to determine each colleague's belief system and the extent to which they would be

willing to support his work with teaching students about these themes. While levels of support vary among colleagues and administration, Ryan stated that the level of support from administration greatly affects what he decides to teach, his level of comfort, and his certainty about how in depth he should go with certain topics. Both Ryan's decision to not share details with colleagues and the change in his comfort levels based on administrative support are a result of his desire to avoid creating any issues.

Samantha described that she and her principal of the past seven years share the same kind of vision about equity, which has allowed for her to carry out school-wide gender and sexual diversity related practices knowing that she will be entirely supported. For instance, while allowing a transgender student to carry out a school presentation for 400 students, Samantha was aware that if somebody did complain, the principal would enter them into a dialogue or conversation about the topic of gender and sexual diversity, and Samantha would not "be in trouble." Samantha also explained that her superintendent and educative director have demonstrated support for teaching about gender and sexual diversity by implementing a workshop for teachers on gender equity and inclusivity, which she expressed as being very empowering for her.

Contrarily, Theo explained that although he has received little to no support from his colleagues and administration, he has learned over time that speaking about and promoting affirmation and equity should not be something that he feels scared to do. Although this sometimes makes him feel lonely (as a result of having minimal support from colleagues and administration), he reminds himself about the positive responses he has seen from his students in the past and the fact that he is at a point in his career where he is passed his retirement date and believes that the consequences now are quite minimal, if not completely non-existent.

Typically, the level of support a teacher receives from their administration and colleagues is important for ensuring that teachers feel comfortable enough to educate about gender and sexual diversity as a preventative measure to homophobic bullying. While educators hold fears about job security, parental opposition and fears about how students may change their perceptions of them (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007; Whittingham & Rickman 2007, as cited by Flores, 2008; Hanlon, 2009, as cited in Hernandez, 2013), it is evident in Ryan and Samantha's responses that their level of comfort and feelings of empowerment can be influenced by administrative and collegial support.

#### **4.2.2 Participants overcame apparent challenges in Catholicism's policies and governing beliefs by highlighting its more central message of peace and love.**

While there are existing policies and beliefs that suggest Catholicism's disapproval of LGBTIQ+ behaviours, all participants expressed that they often refer to Catholic policies and beliefs for support. Ryan highlighted the Preferential Option for the Poor (where it is everyone's responsibility to look out for the marginalized, poor, ill, and victims of injustice and oppression to try and make everything as fair as possible) as a specific Catholic teaching that reconciles with respect and acceptance for gender and sexual diversity. He expressed that he views the term "poor" as something that goes beyond one's financial position and can encompass anyone that struggles with any aspect of their identity. Similarly, Ryan spoke to the beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," as an additional Catholic teaching that reconciles with teaching students respect and acceptance for everyone, as in his mind, people who are poor in spirit are those who struggle with their identity and thus are essentially in a state of shock. His interpretation of this principle emphasizes the feeling of acceptance for everyone, and while there are apparent contradictions between Catholic beliefs and the acceptance of

gender and sexual diversity, these specific teachings serve as strong supports for educators who wish to teach respect and acceptance for gender and sexual diversity in the Catholic school context.

Some of the key teachings that Samantha recognized as support for her work are “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” and “Judge not lest you be judged yourself” because they both speak to the idea of human beings creating a peace-filled world rather than judging one another. She explained that when teachers aid students in focusing on peace rather than judgment, they illustrate that, from a theological perspective, it is no one’s role but God’s to determine whether a person is right or wrong, and whether or not their actions are to be considered a sin. Samantha also pointed out that the Catechism (a summary of all Catholic beliefs written and promulgated by various Popes over time that serves as a large aspect of the Catholic church and governs publicly funded Catholic schools) encompasses a dichotomous nature by teaching both that people are to be treated with compassion, and that the homosexual act is to be viewed as “gravely disordered” (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], 2011, para. 2357). Yet, she said, it can serve as a support for teaching gender diversity when it is used as a starting point for conversation, rather than as a rulebook or a place to end a conversation. Samantha expressed that this tension arises because once someone fully rejects or accepts the doctrine, they do not leave a lot of space for the self and for thinking, and as a result they become generally bigoted, which is definitely not a quality that aids in developing feelings of equity and inclusion among people.

Theo emphasized Pope Francis as being a great support with regards to some of the wonderful things he has recently said about celebrating people and the Preferential Option of the Poor. Theo also expressed that there is a beautiful message of hope and the wonderful gift of

sacramentality within the Catholic faith that is exemplified throughout the *Catholic Social Teachings* (also stated by Cummings, 2013), which he referred to as the “church’s best kept secret.” He explained that many of the *Catholic Social Teachings* can also be pulled to teach about the dignity of the person, working to the common good, and the rights of all people to participate, which ultimately shows that the Catholic faith *can be* a safe space for all people.

#### **4.2.3 Participants gain reassurance, lesson material, and encouragement of their inclusive stance through resources that promote teaching gender and sexual diversity.**

Theo expressed several progressive resources and factors that have served to encourage his work in teaching gender and sexual diversity in Catholic schools. Theo stated that resources like *Egale Canada*, his teacher’s union’s (Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Association [OECTA]) professional learning committee around equity and inclusion and the corresponding policies, and the recent curriculum document updates to *Ontario’s Health and Physical Education [HPE]* curriculum have demonstrated to him that some changes are being put in place that allow for a slight form of progression to occur. However, Theo also stated that these resources are limited as a result of beliefs held within the *CCC* and the limitations in curriculum documents that mention members of the LGBTIQ+ community but neglect to actually celebrate them.

Theo expressed that his number one form of encouragement and influence are the people he has met at the summer camp he works at and their efforts that were made to create “a spirit of legitimate inclusion” that he is able to “sprinkle on his curriculum.” Suggestively, by knowing about and learning from people who hold the same beliefs as he does and are able to carry out corresponding practices successfully, Theo is able to gain a sense of reassurance that his beliefs are important and that it is possible to positively implement such practices that can benefit his students. Theo does this by ensuring that his word choices are free of any negative connotations

(e.g., using the word “explore,” instead of “struggle” for describing how one learns about their own sexual identity), by discussing current events and the stories of amazing people who identify as LGBTIQ+, and by using himself and his own personal learning journey as an example for how people can learn from their mistakes. Through use of these examples, Theo implements the concept of a *tolerance continuum* in his classroom, which focuses on different forms of diversity (e.g., racial, religious) and then scaffolds students in progressing through its five stages. These stages are (1) annihilation, where people try to destroy something to assimilation, (2) where people accept others “so long as they change,” (3) tolerance, where people are able to tolerate differences without having any form of relationship with anyone who is seemingly different, (4) where people learn to respect others and (5) where people celebrate one another for who they truly are. This approach encourages students to move beyond tolerating people to a state where they are able to accept and embrace the diversity surrounding them. This also diminishes the idea that some people are better than others simply because of their ability to fit societal norms.

Similarly, Samantha drew attention to *Egale Canada* as an excellent resource for teaching such topics, with their provision of lessons and visual aids such as the *Genderbread Person*. As symbolic support for herself and her students with regards to openly discussing and accepting gender and sexual diversity, Samantha explained that she has a *safe space* sticker (that has a rainbow on it) and a *coexists* sign (with multi-faith symbols on it) in her classroom. She also shared that she makes a point to ensure that her language is fully inclusive by referring to her students as “folks” or “friends” and by referring to people’s husbands and wives as “partner” or “intimate partner,” so that there is not a specific gender attached to her general language. She has attended many workshops put on by her Catholic school for this topic, and she teaches a high

school course called “Equity and Social Justice” where she teaches an entire unit on gender. For Samantha, this demonstrates that there is an importance for these topics in the Catholic system.

Personal and school related supports that Ryan described were the fact that he is able to run a social justice club at his school, and particular curriculum documents (i.e., *Family Life* and *HPE*) that support him in teaching about homosexuality and sexual identity when he does it in a discussion format that incorporates his own personal stories and related student experiences. Ryan also mentioned that he uses a cross-curricular approach where he incorporates social justice topics with language and the arts. Ryan described that he is better able to find his own personal comfort zone when he is surrounded by supportive teachers (i.e., his brother and sister-in-law who both teach gender and sexual diversity topics at a post-secondary level).

In addition to the supports mentioned by all three participants, teachers in Ontario are supported in teaching gender and sexual diversity by various policies, regulations and organizations. For instance, the *Accepting Schools Act (Bill 13)* (2012) requires all school boards to (1) implement policies that combat bullying and promote a positive school climate that is including and accepting of all pupils and (2) implement activities or organizations that promote the awareness and understanding of, and respect for all people. Additionally, the *2009 Policy/Program Memorandum, No. 119* supports the teaching of sensitive issues (Hernandez, 2013), and the Canadian Teachers’ Federation [CTF] and the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario [ETFO], which have both amended their codes of professional conduct and statements of teacher’s rights and responsibilities to include sexual orientation as a character of person to be protected against discrimination (Grace and Wells, 2005).

### **4.3 Participants Have Experienced Various Responses From Administrators, Colleagues and Parents That Have Impacted Their Teaching Practices**

In choosing to teach about gender and sexual diversity in the Catholic school system, all participants have experienced a range of negative and positive responses from students' parents, colleagues, and administration. This section explores how these responses have helped participants stay rooted in their goals and beliefs for their practices. I intend for this section to provide readers with an insight into how teachers can find a balance between opposing views and meeting their students' needs when it comes to teaching about gender and sexual diversity in Catholic schools.

#### **4.3.1 Participants have experienced both explicit and implicit positive and negative responses from their students' parents as a result of their children learning about gender and sexual diversity.**

After attending a few workshops and feeling quite empowered from what he had learned, Theo put up a rainbow peace flag to ensure that all students felt fully welcomed and accepted in his classroom. When a parent found out about this flag, they complained to the local Catechism club and priest. From there, the priest complained to the director of education, who then brought the flag to the attention of Theo's superintendent and principal, which resulted in Theo having to explain to the principal, superintendent and union president that he was not vilifying the Catholic faith as the parent and priest had claimed he was. While this parental response was very explicit and negative, Theo shared that he has also received positive responses to his teaching practices from parents through their decision to send their children to the summer camp he runs (which is a very intentionally inclusive space) and the positive feedback they provided him with regards to

the camp. Theo suggested that positive responses from parents are typically implicit due to the limited interactions with parents when teaching high school.

Similarly, Ryan described that all responses from parents were minimal, however he explained that this is because parents do not always know about classroom discussions. Ryan suggested that this could be due to the low level of comfort that students have when it comes to talking to their parents about gender and sexuality. With regards to Ryan's own actions, such as participating in Toronto's Pride Parade, he shared that one parent explicitly expressed positive support for him and his decision to do so.

In Samantha's experiences, she claimed that she has received praise and support in her teaching about gender and sexual diversity from her students' parents. Specifically, there are some students who identify as LGBTIQ+ whose parents are very grateful that their child(ren) are receiving support within their school community, and there have been other instances of parents communicating to Samantha that they are glad such conversations are happening within their child's classroom. Perhaps a large contribution to this positive support and feedback from parents may be the high level of administrative support that Samantha receives. Interestingly, the experiences of Theo and Samantha illustrate varying outcomes where the teacher who had administrative support experienced mainly positive responses from parents, and the teacher who lacked administrative support experienced more negative responses. Whether administrative support has a direct impact on parent responses or not, it is vital that educators (principals and teachers) work towards creating positive school climates. This is because as Eccles et al., (1993) explain, if a classroom does not fit the needs of the children within it [i.e., LGBTIQ+ students], academic and social difficulties may follow (as cited by Birkett et al., 2009). This will likely grant additional negative responses from parents and ultimately could replace one set of

complaints with another (e.g., complaints about children learning about gender and sexual diversity versus complaints about children's academic and social difficulties).

#### **4.3.2 Participants have received both positive and negative responses from colleagues and administration with regards to their teaching about gender and sexual diversity.**

Theo reflected on a workshop that was offered for teachers about gender and sexual diversity (specific topic not specified) and the fact that his vice principal participated in a class event where they traced their hands in purple on a wall (making reference to the 1969 incident in San Francisco when a group of people from the gay community protested at a newspaper about homophobic and derogatory articles and in response, the people working in the newspaper building poured purple ink on all the people protesting, from which the protesters decided to leave purple handprints and designs all over the building's walls). However, he also mentioned several occasions where he did not receive support from administration or colleagues. For example, when his principal did not allow him to form a gay straight alliance [GSA] club in the school despite the demand for it from students, when he had to face the principal, superintendent and union president in response to a parent complaining about his rainbow peace flag in the classroom and him allowing students to present a play called "Adam and Steve" (which comes from the homophobic line that some preachers have said: "I looked at the Bible; it's not Adam and Steve, it's Adam and Eve!"), and when colleagues complained when he and students in his social justice club wore pink shirts on a day they dedicated to ending homophobic bullying to raise awareness for a "no homophobes" website. Theo acknowledged that while the teacher workshop and vice principal's interest in what he was doing with his class was a good step in the right direction, neither incident displayed good leadership, especially when considering the lack of support from his colleagues.

As mentioned previously, Samantha received positive responses to her teaching practices from her administration. With regards to her colleagues, Samantha expressed that her staff is fantastic as they publicly support her in teaching about gender and sexual diversity. Contrarily, Ryan stated that he has some colleagues who are very supportive of him, and others who are not. These differences in collegial and administrative support are reflective of what Samantha expressed, which was that each school context is different as a result of its principal's views and the impact those views have on school policies and procedures. When looking at how impactful administrative support can be on one's decision to teach particular topics, it illustrates how important it is for administration to be supportive of their staff and the work they carry out to create a safe space within their school. This is because without this support, teachers may feel less inclined to educate about gender and sexual diversity, which can then reinforce the Catholic education system's dictations of conservative principles and intentional blindness to various social conditions and influences of its populations (Brennan, 2010).

**4.3.3 Participants described their actions in response to varying levels of parental, collegial and administrative support as serving to help them stay rooted in their goals and beliefs for their practices, while also helping them find a balance between opposing views and their students' needs.**

With regards to administrative support, Theo acknowledged that it is not the greatest for him, however, he recognizes that there is still some progress occurring and that it is important to allow baby steps. He expressed that he struggles with feelings of unfairness when he and his students go out wearing pink shirts or tracing purple hands and they are accused of pushing an agenda. This feeling of unfairness though, reminds Theo of social inequities that he has witnessed in his past (i.e., his gay friend getting fired from his teaching job after marrying his

partner). Firstly, this helps him remember that things have come a long way. Secondly, it reinforces his belief in the need for accepting people for who they are, and thirdly, it further motivates him to take a stand so that these issues can be addressed extensively and so that people can progress even further with regards to openly accepting gender and sexual diversity. The importance of continuing progress for teaching about gender and sexual diversity in Catholic schools is further exemplified by Solomon and Russell (2004) who explain that the many barriers that LGBTIQ+ youth consistently face put them at risk for “low self-esteem, parental rejection, peer abuse, substance abuse, dropping out of school, homelessness, unsafe sexual behaviour, prostitution, self-injury and suicide” (p. 2).

Samantha described an aspect of her teaching career as being a balancing act, where she works with students who have liberally minded parents and other students who have conservatively minded parents. She said that while working in this context she tries to demonstrate acceptance and love, while making sure that there is a progression towards a more equal and just society without alienating anyone in the process. In doing this however, Samantha finds herself wondering, “what does equal and just mean?” While it may mean acceptance and love for absolutely everyone, she interacts with some people who may only agree to this with the exclusion of homosexual people. This leads to the challenge of trying to attain a balance between demonstrating respect for conservative viewpoints, while also challenging and asking people to understand a variety of perspectives to try to “get people to move in a direction that is more inclusive without battering them over the head with it.” Samantha then explained that sometimes, this means that you have to just “put yourself out on a limb and take a risk, knowing that you may get the odd parent phone call.” Samantha expressed that when acknowledging the various responses from people about her decision to teach about gender and sexual diversity, she realizes

that many people forget the biggest call for all Catholics. To her this call comes from the root meaning of the word “Catholic”, which is the Greek word for “universal.” To Samantha, in order to be inline with this root meaning, Catholics need to universally love and accept human beings regardless of what makes them who they are.

#### **4.4 Participants Described Action-Based and Emotional Outcomes From Their Students After Teaching About Gender and Sexual Diversity**

All participants expressed that they noticed various outcomes from students after teaching them about gender and sexual diversity. Throughout participant experiences, there was recognition of an increase in student community involvement within their schools and demonstrations of feelings of safety among students. Two participants shared that some students displayed negative outcomes such as teacher resentment and disengagement in response to learning about gender and sexual diversity. In this section, I aim to illustrate that teaching such topics in the Catholic school context can result in a range of positive and negative outcomes among students.

##### **4.4.1 Participants have witnessed an increase in student community involvement after teaching about gender and sexual diversity.**

Samantha illustrated an excellent example of an increase in student community involvement when she spoke about the workshop at her school that was led by a transgender student, where 400 students attended. This displayed an increase in student community involvement because it demonstrated that 400 students were eager to learn more about the journey of a transgender individual, which can in turn help to teach the students about tolerance and inclusivity (Flores, 2012; Hernandez, 2013). In addition to this, Samantha discussed that her

students respond to discussions about this topic very positively, as they are often topics that they encounter daily.

Theo spoke about an increase in student community involvement when he shared that several of his students wanted to go to an event that was inviting GSA's from different schools, and also when they wanted to form their own GSA (although they were not allowed to do either). He also shared that on the day against homophobic and transphobic bullying, his students created beautiful designs with rainbows and chalk on the pavement in front of the school, which was a lot more than Theo thought that they were going to do. In both these examples, the students demonstrated an increase in their community involvement by wanting to engage with students from other schools, and by bringing awareness of the LGBTIQ+ community to the entire school community. This is an excellent outcome as it enabled the students to self-reflect and acknowledge the lived realities of Catholic individuals (Brennan, 2010). This can ultimately encourage students to further engage with the Catholic community, rather than feel pushed away by homophobic attitudes (present in the *CCC*) (Brennan, 2010).

#### **4.4.2 Participants have witnessed students demonstrating increased feelings of safety through their openness and willingness to discuss gender and sexual diversity topics.**

Ryan shared that an indicator for how safe and comfortable a student feels in his classroom is how in-depth they will go with discussing gender and sexual diversity. Samantha stated that when students are far along enough in their own journey of gender and sexual identity and exploration, they are more likely to bring up such topics in class. She also explained that as a result of this topic becoming more tolerated in schools in the last five to ten years, students have brought it up more now than they have in the past. According to Athansases (1996), Moita-Lopes (2006) and Swartz (2003), this may be because the presentation of LGBTIQ+ themed literature

and lessons can help build tolerance and acceptance among children (as cited in Flores, 2012, p. 190). This is demonstrated in Samantha's description of her own students in the past and present.

While there are many students who display explicit benefits from learning about gender and sexual diversity, Theo expressed that there are also some students who are just neutral. He explained:

There's a whole group of people who don't really care, which is okay, I mean you can't really care about every issue in the world right? There's some kids who just want to learn about their math, and they don't really hate anybody, they don't want to learn about anyone else's struggles. You know, they're just there.

While Theo's experience is not necessarily in line with the idea that all students experience increased feelings of safety from learning about gender and sexual diversity, it demonstrates that one cannot expect enthusiastic responses from all students.

#### **4.4.3 Participants have witnessed negative student outcomes such as teacher resentment and disengagement in response to them teaching gender and sexual diversity.**

Samantha explained that in her viewpoint of her school, talking about and being able to accept gender and sexual diversity is more of an adult problem than a student problem. This is because in her experience, while the students are always fine with these topics, the adults sometimes are not. Correspondingly, Theo indicated that he prefers to work on these topics with students and youths rather than with adults because when he is teaching about gender and sexual diversity, he often experiences feelings of exclusion and isolation from colleagues and parents for "pushing an agenda." He also stated that in many cases, it seems as though the students are well past issues that the adults are still struggling to accept. Having said that, there are still instances where students ("typically those who come from a conservative, right-wing Christian

background”) have demonstrated negative feelings towards teachers who teach gender and sexual diversity. For example, Theo explained that there is a small group of students in his classroom who “don’t want too much to do with me sometimes” because they still view the way that LGBTIQ+ people are as being very sinful and they find discussions about gender and sexual diversity to be very offensive.

Samantha shared that one of the negative things she has seen from students in response to discussing Catholic teachings on sexuality is when they get to a place where they are angry at God or angry at spirituality (perhaps as a result of their religious beliefs clashing with their own gender or sexual based feelings and/or identity). Samantha suggested that this could be due to the fact that some of the teachings that they discuss can be traumatizing for particular individuals, which sometimes makes Samantha wonder if teaching the Catholic teachings on sexuality is doing more harm than good in the psychological manner. However, as Ellwood (2014) states, education that fails to acknowledge and accept differences can be deeply harmful to students. Thus, Samantha’s decision to teach about Catholic teachings on sexuality may serve as a healthy practice as she allows students to acknowledge and accept differences, providing them with a safe space to question, explore and learn about their faith, and allowing them to gain a better understanding of the faith they are practicing.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

Throughout my analysis, I described each theme, reported on the corresponding data and concluded by making connections to existing literature. I found that the participants’ passion for teaching about gender and sexual diversity in the Catholic school context stemmed from either their family’s beliefs and practices within Catholicism or their exposures to diverse people and experiences in their early to late adulthoods. Participants claimed that having administrative and

collegial support was typically very important for feeling comfortable enough to teach such topics in depth, and to be able to effectively act upon the positive and negative responses from students and their parents. These findings are significant because they address various supports, strategies, and outcomes for teaching about gender and sexual diversity in the Catholic school context. They also address responses to the claim that teaching about gender and sexual diversity is contradictory to the faith and its teachings. Such research can raise awareness about the benefits of teaching students about such themes, which can serve to empower teachers who believe it is important to create school and classroom communities that are fully inclusive of everyone, regardless of the faith they are being brought up in. In Chapter 5, I discuss broad and narrow implications for these findings, and give recommendations for potential areas of further research.

## **Chapter 5: Implications and Recommendations**

### **5.0 Introduction**

In this chapter, I discuss the overall implications and significance of this research study. I do this by reviewing my key findings on how Catholic educators create opportunities for students to learn about sexual and gender diversity in ways that speak to, rather than discard their Catholic faith, and without excluding or shaming individuals who do not conform to heterosexual norms. Next, I discuss the implications of the findings for both the educational community and my own practice as a beginning teacher. I then make recommendations that may be utilized by other educational communities, such as teachers, principals, parents, school boards and the Roman Catholic Church. To conclude, I pose questions and suggest areas that I believe would benefit from further research and discussion.

### 5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

As discussed in Chapter 4, the topic of gender and sexual diversity in the Catholic school context can be positively incorporated into daily practices in a way that (1) speaks to and embraces the Catholic faith, rather than discarding it, and (2) promotes feelings of acceptance and inclusion for all people within the school community. The participants of this study illustrate how this can be done through their own experiences and teaching practices, which demonstrates how the *Accepting Schools Act's (Bill 13)* (2012) intentions and goals to combat bullying and promote a positive school climate may look in actual practice.

All three participants expressed that their development and commitment to teaching gender and sexual diversity stemmed from personal experiences related to their religious upbringings, and personal feelings of compassion towards others. It was found that when teachers acted based on their own feelings and beliefs, they seemed to be more passionate about the approaches they took, and were then better able to understand the outcomes their students may gain. Participants' actions served to aid students in developing empathy and compassion for others. According to Swartz (2003), this can potentially combat the risk that without knowledge, children resort to theorizing about sexuality, sexual identity, gender roles and sexual orientation based on their family, friends, religion, media and other social and cultural influences (as cited in Flores, 2012). These factors can sometimes result in children developing theories governed by fear and negative attitudes and thus lead to poor attitudes that influence a negative school climate (Swartz, 2003, as cited in Flores, 2012).

Two participants shared that administrative and collegial support highly influenced their actions and comfort levels with teaching gender and sexual diversity. Particularly, one participant explained that while it helps to have administrative and collegial support, it was no

longer a necessary support for him to teach such themes. Additionally, all participants found support from Catholic policies and beliefs, as well as personal, school related and government supported resources. These include Catholic teachings such as the Preferential Option for the Poor (where it is everyone's responsibility to look out for the marginalized, poor, ill and victims of injustice and oppression to try and make everything as fair as possible), the phrases "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and "Judge not lest you be judged yourself," and the beatitude "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." They also include the *Catholic Social Teachings*, *Egale Canada*, and the *Ontario Health and Physical Education and Family Life* Curriculums. Participants also expressed that they gained reassurance for teaching gender and sexual diversity from various policies, regulations and organizations such as the *Accepting Schools Act (Bill 13)* (2012), the *2009 Policy/Program Memorandum, No. 119* which supports the teaching of sensitive issues (Hernandez, 2013), the Canadian Teachers' Federation [CTF] and the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario [ETFO]. These both amended their codes of professional conduct and statements of teacher's rights and responsibilities to include sexual orientation as a character of person to be protected against discrimination (Grace and Wells, 2005).

Participants experienced a range of negative and positive responses from students' parents, colleagues and administration for teaching their students about gender and sexual diversity. While one participant was reported by a parent to a priest and the director of education for having a rainbow peace flag in his classroom, another participant was praised and supported by students' parents for educating her students about such themes. Interestingly, the participant who experienced more negative responses from parents had minimal support from

administration, and the participant who often experienced positive responses from parents had ongoing administrative support.

Furthermore, participants noticed various outcomes from their students after teaching them about gender and sexual diversity. Specifically, participants recognized an increase in student community involvement within their schools and demonstrations of feelings of safety among students. Contrarily, two participants shared that some students displayed negative outcomes such as teacher resentment and disengagement, and one participant expressed that some students are just neutral, where they “just want to learn about their math, and they don’t really hate anybody, they don’t want to learn about anyone else’s struggles.”

These findings are significant because they illustrate the various student outcomes and responses from students’ parents, colleagues, and administrators to teaching gender and sexual diversity in the Catholic school context. This can help educators understand the potential for teaching such themes to achieve feelings of safety and inclusion within the school community.

## **5.2 Implications**

In this section, I highlight the implications of my research for both the educational research community (i.e., teachers, principals, parents, school boards, and the Roman Catholic church) and my own practice and growth as a new educator.

### **5.2.1 The Educational Research Community**

The potential and possibilities for teaching students (of all ages) about gender and sexual diversity, without clashing with or discarding the Catholic faith have been exemplified by the participants as being quite plentiful. With this, it is evident that teaching these themes in the Catholic school context is possible and likely to serve as a benefit to many students by increasing student community involvement and demonstrations of feelings of safety among students

through their openness and willingness to discuss gender and sexual diversity topics.

Consequently, such outcomes have contributed to the creation of a safe, inclusive school environment, which has allowed for individuals to experience positive outcomes with regards to school, academics and the self through feelings of acceptance in their school communities.

It is critical to recognize that a community of any sorts cannot be fully inclusive if it does not truly accept and celebrate everyone within it. This can be achieved by teaching about gender and sexual diversity because this allows teachers and students to recognize, acknowledge, discuss, learn, accept and celebrate people from all social communities (particularly the LGBTIQ+ community). Teaching these themes also enables schools to better meet education based policies and mission statements such as, (1) the *2009 Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119*, which focuses on developing and implementing equity and inclusive education policies in Ontario schools, (2) the *Ontario Human Rights Code [OHRC]*, which prohibits discrimination on race, colour, ancestry, place of origin, citizenship, ethnic origin, disability, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, family status and marital status, thus supporting and mandating LGBTIQ+ issues within the classroom, and (3) the Toronto Catholic District School Board's [TCDSB] *Respecting Differences* policy document, which promotes equity and respect for all students (Ontario Catholic School Trustee's Association [OCST], 2012). This is worth noting particularly for school teachers, principals and boards as meeting policies is mandatory for ensuring legal protection and security, and the overall happiness and contentment of the public.

Lastly, this research suggests that although some topics may appear to be sensitive or controversial to some, knowledge is essentially the equivalent to power. Without knowledge, people become driven by ignorance and inaccuracies that can be harmful to LGBTIQ+ people (or anyone who does not conform to societal norms), which often results in the exclusion and social

isolation of others (Collier et al., 2013). Thus, it can be concluded that if educators can teach students of all ages about gender and sexuality in an appropriate way, then they will not be harmed, and instead will be more enlightened and aware of the various social groups living in their world.

### **5.2.2 My Professional Identity and Practice**

In the years of becoming a certified teacher in Ontario, my passion and belief in social justice education has grown immensely, as I believe it enables students of all ages to become better aware of the diversity in our world. With this understanding, students can develop and exercise empathy and grow to understand that although we are driven by societal norms, people have the right to express how they feel and live a life that is true to who they are without having to deal with the negative effects of social exclusion and isolation (e.g., dropping out of school, depression, substance use and abuse, homelessness, suicide).

Some of my main reasons for wanting to learn about how to teach gender and sexual diversity in the Catholic school context is because of the high value I see in doing so, and the fear I once held of having to deal with upset parents or losing a teaching job for exposing students to such content. While it is common for teachers to reject the idea of teaching gender and sexual diversity in the classroom for these reasons (something that I have witnessed far too often in my teaching experiences), there are many Ontario laws and policies that protect teachers in doing so. For instance, the CTF and the ETFO (2003) have amended their codes of professional conduct and statements of teacher's rights and responsibilities to include sexual orientation as a character of person to be protected against discrimination in keeping with the law and the land, which ultimately protects any educator who identifies as LGBTIQ+ or chooses to

teach these themes (Grace and Wells, 2005). Fortunately, these policies help support me in defending my decision to educate my students about gender and sexual diversity.

I have learned that there are many governing principles and beliefs within the Catholic faith that can help to teach these themes through the Catholic lens. Some examples mentioned by participants include the Preferential Option for the Poor, the phrases “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” and “Judge not lest you be judged yourself,” and the beatitude “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” the *Catholic Social Teachings*, *Egale Canada*, and the *Ontario Health and Physical Education and Family Life* Curriculums. This has informed me that the two topics I once feared to combine (i.e., Catholicism and gender and sexual diversity) can actually come together quite beautifully to teach students about diversity for everyone from the view of Catholicism.

Learning about the support offered through various policies and beliefs has demonstrated to me the importance of staying engaged with, and up to date with this area of research. This further encourages my teaching practices to be research driven and supported so that my actions as a teacher are meaningful and beneficial to my students and the school communities I work in. More specifically, I will provide my students with ongoing opportunities to engage with people and cultures from various social groups through children’s literature, guest speakers, different forms of media (e.g., fictional and nonfictional videos), current events, and open classroom discussions. This will allow for my students to expand their thinking and concepts of others in a way that encourages them to move from tolerating differences, to accepting differences, and then to finally being able to celebrate and embrace the differences within our society.

### **5.3 Recommendations**

Although there are existing literature and policies that support Catholic schools in teaching gender and sexual diversity to students of all ages, many changes still need to be made for further progression to occur. With my own research and findings in mind, I make recommendations for change in the following areas: the Ministry of Education, Catholic School Boards, the Roman Catholic Church and the *1867 Constitution Act*, and Educator attitudes and engagement with research.

#### **5.3.1 Ministry of Education**

When something becomes part of a curriculum document, teachers are required to teach it to their students. If the Ministry of Education can implement gender and sexual diversity (in more depth) throughout the curriculum for all ages, then teaching this content to students would no longer be optional. Such an approach is currently exemplified by ETFO's and the Toronto District School Board's [TDSB] collaborative creation of a curriculum document called *Rainbows and Triangles*, which is intended to challenge homophobia and heterosexism in the K-6 classroom (Borst, 2003). The incorporation of gender and sexual diversity education into the curriculum can help to normalize people within the LGBTIQ+ community and allow for learners to view it in the same way they view an already normalized social group (e.g., Catholics). This could then help to enlighten people about gender and sexual diversity, which could potentially aid in reducing instances of homophobic bullying.

#### **5.3.2 Catholic School Boards**

Many Catholic school boards (e.g., Toronto Catholic District School Board, Dufferin Peel Catholic District School board) have already implemented policies for inclusion and human rights (e.g., OHRC), however very little is done by school boards for following up and ensuring

that these policies are being followed through with regularly. My recommendation is for these policies to serve as more than just content posted on a website, through the requirement of them to be openly met for students of all diversities (whether it is gender-based or not). This can be achieved through the incorporation of gender and sexual diversity into curriculum documents, and can be monitored through student wellbeing surveys (completed by students) that measure the extent of which students feel represented and celebrated in their school community.

### **5.3.3 Roman Catholic Church and the Constitution Act of 1867**

While social justice is central to Catholicism, there are many times when Catholic beliefs and writings (i.e., Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC]) are used as a rulebook, where people who do not conform to everything that is written are deemed as sinners and people who must change. I believe that the Catholic faith has more to offer than the judgment and the exclusion of people who are “different,” such as the many policies and beliefs that are governed by love, acceptance, inclusion and social justice. I think that the Catholic church should use their policies and beliefs in a more positive light when regarding gender and sexual diversity, so that everyone can feel included, welcomed and accepted and so that all people can feel more drawn to practicing the faith, rather than feeling like they will only belong if they change who they are.

On a greater scale, I believe that changes should be made to the *Constitution Act* (1867), where Catholic schools still work in collaboration with the Catholic church, but are able to do so in a way that better aligns with the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. This can be done by having schools refer to the CCC and biblical scriptures as conversation starters, rather than as rules and standards that must be met. If meaningful conversations among teachers and students can be started from Catholic writings, then teachers can continue to use the *Catholic Social*

*Teachings* to guide their students to meet the Catholic Graduate expectations in a more inclusive and positive way that embraces every student for who they truly are.

#### **5.3.4 Educators**

My last recommendation is for all teachers and principals who work in the Catholic school system to be aware of current research, policies and regulations that allow and support the teaching of gender and sexual diversity. This is vital in allowing Catholic schools to progress in teaching these themes because if educators have the accurate knowledge and understanding of the benefits for students and the policy support they have in this work, then they will be more inclined to allow and encourage it to happen. Through the ongoing implementation of teaching about gender and sexual diversity, schools will become safer spaces for many students, which will help contribute to a more positive school climate. I believe that once students are able to feel safe and accepted, they are better able to focus on their academics, achieve higher goals and work towards meeting their fullest potentials.

#### **5.4 Areas for Further Research**

This section will highlight areas for further research based on this study's findings and implications. It is exemplified by participant experiences that support from administration can impact teachers' comfort levels with regards to teaching gender and sexual diversity in the Catholic school context. It was also suggested that the amount of support a teacher has from their administration may also affect the way that parents respond to such discussions being had in the classroom. As a result, I believe that more work needs to be done on principals' perspectives with regards to supporting teachers in educating about gender and sexuality. This could aid in trying to gain a better understanding of why principals sometimes choose to not support teachers in this work, in spite of the benefits this work has had on students in the past. Further research

should also be done on whether or not the level of support from administration can affect the social-emotional wellbeing of teachers in the workplace. This could help in understanding the dynamics between teachers and their administration and how this gets passed through teachers' practices and their students' outcomes.

Although it has been found that there is room for change and the possibility for incorporating topics of gender and sexual diversity within Catholic schools (with supporting policies), more work needs to be done to learn about how changes can be made to the Catholic church setting. More specifically, how can gender and sexual diversity education and the positive acknowledgement of the LGBTIQ+ community become more prevalent in the Catholic Church setting (i.e., during public masses)? I think it is important to learn about how priests can become more open-minded and accepting of people who are gender and sexually diverse, and if this would have an impact on the public and their willingness to also accept differences. Additionally, I would like to learn how this could affect Catholic schools and the opinion of the general public with regards to acknowledging, accepting and celebrating diversity.

Lastly, I believe that more research needs to be done on how teachers can teach gender and sexual diversity in school settings that are governed by religions other than Catholicism (e.g., Muslim, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism etc). I would like to try and understand if the same (or similar) findings would come from studying how to teach such themes in settings where many religions are factored into the makeup of a school community.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

This research study has helped me to better understand the benefits to social justice education, and the extent of which I can teach my students about social justice themes such as gender and sexual diversity. Through my exploration of relevant literature and my interviews

with Ryan, Theo, and Samantha, I have learned about how personal experiences and learning curves can lead to one's development and commitment to teaching gender and sexual diversity. I have gained further insight into how collegial and administrative support, Catholic policies and governing beliefs, and various personal and government resources can serve as both supports and challenges for teaching such themes. Ryan, Theo and Samantha have helped to shed light on the potential responses to teaching gender and sexual diversity in the Catholic school context from administration, colleagues and parents, which has demonstrated numerous ways for how others' responses may impact one's teaching practices. Furthermore, the participants provided different ways for dealing with negative responses to teaching about gender and sexual diversity, aiding me in my own practices, where I will likely encounter people with opposing views. Lastly, this research has enlightened me with a range of concrete, action-based and emotional outcomes from students after learning about gender and sexual diversity in the Catholic school context, which helps to justify the importance of this work.

This research study provides insight into how Catholic educators can create opportunities for students to learn about gender and sexual diversity in ways that speak to, rather than discard their Catholic faith, without excluding or shaming individuals who do not conform to heterosexual norms. I have been inspired to carry out these very practices in my own work so that I can provide a safe learning space that will enable my students to reach their fullest academic and personal potentials.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Letter of Consent



Date:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My Name is Elizabeth Maiorano and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on how Catholic school teachers teach about sexual and gender diversity in ways that align with faith-based curriculum. I am interested in interviewing teachers who actively provide opportunities for their students to learn about sexual and gender diversity in ways that positively align with Catholicism. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,  
Elizabeth Maiorano

Course Instructor's Name:  
Contact Info:

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Elizabeth Maiorano and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  
OISE | ONTARIO INSTITUTE  
FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION

Thank you for participating in my research study. The data collected in this interview will contribute to my Masters of Teaching Research Paper, a requirement for completing my teaching degree. The aim of this research is to learn how Catholic school teachers teach about sexual and gender diversity in ways that align with faith-based curriculum. This interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes, and is comprised of approximately 30 questions.

The interview protocol has been divided into 5 sections, beginning with your background information, followed by questions about beliefs, practices, things that support and challenge you, and next steps and recommendations. I want to remind you that you can choose not to answer any question, and can remove yourself from participation at any time. Your participation is greatly appreciated and everything you say is confidential. Do you have any questions before we begin?

### Background Information:

1. Can you describe for me your current position?
  - a. What grade do you teach? (*Which subject areas, if applicable*)
  - b. What grades and subjects have you taught previously over the span of your teaching career?
  - c. Do you fulfill any other roles in your school, in addition to being a classroom teacher? (e.g. advisor, coach, pastor, counsellor)
2. How long have you been teaching?
3. And for how many of those years did you work in the Catholic school system?
4. Why did you choose to teach in a Catholic school board?
5. [If applicable] how do you find teaching in the Catholic school system compares to the public education system with regards to teaching about social justice and equity?
6. You have self-identified as an LGBTQ+ ally and a leader in the realm of social justice education. Can you tell me more about what personal, professional, and education

experiences contributed to developing your commitment and preparation for this work?

**Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs**

7. What do gender and sexual diversity mean to you? How do you understand and define these terms?
8. What do teaching for inclusion and having an inclusive classroom mean to you?
9. Why do you believe that it is important to teach students registered in Catholic schools about gender and sexual diversity?
10. What are some of the benefits you believe your students will gain from learning about gender and sexual diversity in a Catholic school context?
11. In your experience, how common is it for the topic of gender and sexual diversity to be taught in Catholic schools and why?
12. From your perspective, how does the topic of gender and sexual diversity align with the Catholic faith?
  - a. What specific teachings, if any, do you believe reconcile with respect and acceptance for gender and sexual diversity?
  - b. What specific values, if any, do you believe reconcile with respect and acceptance for gender and sexual diversity?
13. From your perspective, how does the topic of gender and sexual diversity not align with the Catholic faith?
  - a. What are some of the key barriers to including more attention to gender and sexual diversity in the Catholic school curriculum?
14. What are some of the drawbacks your students may experience from learning about and being aware of gender and sexual diversity in a Catholic school context?
15. From your perspective:
  - a. how common are incidences of homophobic bullying in Catholic schools?
  - b. how common are expressions of homophobia in Catholic schools?
  - c. How do you respond to these incidences when you see / hear them?

**Teacher Practices and Experiences:**

16. What are your primary learning goals when teaching about gender and sexual diversity in a Catholic school context?

17. What range of topics related to gender and sexual diversity, specifically, do you address with students and how do you connect them to the Catholic school curriculum?
18. Where in the curriculum (subject areas) do you locate this work and why?
19. Can you describe for me some examples of how you have taught about gender and sexual diversity in Catholic school contexts?
  - a. What grade/subject were you teaching?
  - b. What were your learning goals?
  - c. What opportunities for learning did you create?
  - d. How did you connect these lessons to Catholic faith and values, specifically?
  - e. What resources did you use in these lessons? (e.g. books, articles, websites, guest speakers, songs, video etc.)
  - f. How did your students respond to these opportunities? What indicators or outcomes of learning did you observe?
  - g. What, if anything, do you assess in these lessons? How do you assess students' learning on this topic?
20. Would you describe your teaching on this topic as something that occurs consistently, or only during a particular curriculum strand/unit?
21. In your experience, do students raise the topic of gender and sexual diversity, or does this tend to come from you? What indicators of interest from them have you seen?

**Supports and Challenges:**

22. What range of challenges have you experienced when teaching about gender and sexual diversity in Catholic school contexts?
23. Have you ever experienced negative responses from parents during or after discussing gender and sexual diversity within the classroom?
  - a. If yes, can you tell me more about these incidences and how you responded to them?
24. Have you ever experienced any positive responses from parents during or after discussing gender and sexual diversity within the classroom? What has been your experience?
25. What factors and resources support your work on this topic?
26. In your experience, do you have support from your school administration and colleagues?

How does the level of support from colleagues and your principal(s) affect your decisions and actions with regards to teaching to LGBT themes?

**Next Steps:**

27. In your view, what range of supports or changes need to be put in place before more teachers working within Catholic school contexts teach students about gender and sexual diversity?
28. What advice do you have for beginning teachers who are committed to working in Catholic schools contexts and to anti-homophobia education?

Thank you for your time and considered responses ☺