Imperative Risky Business: A Compelling Case for Using Critical Literacy and Social Justice Curricula to Combat Heteronormativity and Homophobia

Imperative Risky Business: A Compelling Case for Using Critical Literacy and Social Justice Curricula to Combat Heteronormativity and Homophobia

by

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DEDICATION

For my teachers, Riley, Cohen, and all of my students - everything I have accomplished

and continue to strive for would not be possible without you.
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ABSTRACT

Recent research documents the oppressive school conditions for Lesbian, Gay Bixsexual, Queer, and Questioning (LGBTQQ) and non-gender conforming students, which can be detrimental to their academic achievement, as well as their physical and psychological well-being. This study explored ways that negative portrayals of LGBTQQ youth and homophobic and heteronormative attitudes might be altered through the incorporation of LGBTQQ texts and critical discussions surrounding the texts, media stereotypes, heteronormativity, heterosexual privilege, and gender in a high school Public Speaking class. The purpose of this study was to investigate ways that curriculum in a high school Public Speaking class might utilize these critical literacy practices within a social justice curriculum to focus on LGBTQQ and gender issues for the purpose of altering student attitudes, beliefs, and actions about LGBTQQ people and combat the victim stereotype. Findings indicate that the majority of students experienced a transformation falling along a continuum from new awareness about LGBTQQ topics to agency expressed through affirming their ally stance.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Maggie: There was one teacher on this hallway actually who—this was, like, at the beginning of the year, and so Paris was dating another girl, Casey, and they were walking, and they were, like, holding hands, and they didn’t, like, make out or anything; they just gave each other a peck on the cheek or something, and one teacher grabbed Paris by the shoulder and said, ‘Are you proud?’ And Paris was like, ‘Yes,’ and walked to class.

Me: Do you think she would have done that to a male-female couple?

Maggie: I don’t think so.

Me: Just the word choice is kind of—

Maggie: It was very condescending.

Maggie, a participant in the pilot study that preceded this dissertation, helped me view the school in which I teach with a new lens. She felt that there was a double standard operating in our school. She believed that teachers addressed public displays of affection differently when the couple was heterosexual versus homosexual. The data excerpt above is an example of this kind of double standard. Would the teacher have made the same language choices and used the same intonation—the undisguised condescending nature of the words “Are you proud?”—or reacted the same way if the couple were heterosexual? Maggie felt patronized.

This instance was one example of the treatment that Maggie, a bisexual female student, witnessed and experienced in high school. It echoes the experiences of many
lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, and questioning (LBGTQQ) students in
schools across the country (Blackburn, 2012; Blackburn, 2004; Human Rights Watch,
2001; Ryan, 2003). As I worked with Maggie and her family through the pilot study, I
came to realize that there were gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or gender
nonconforming students in my classes who were experiencing similar discrimination and
degradation. This was a revelation to me because I assumed that all of my students were
heterosexual unless they explicitly came out to me, and I had not realized the insidious
nature of their negative experiences within the walls of our building.

My limited view of students and their experiences reflects the heteronormativity
that is pervasive in many schools. Because of the silence in the curriculum and school
environments that ignores sexuality, often teachers fail to recognize the diversity of
sexual orientations in their classrooms and the bias directed toward LBGTQQ and non-
gender conforming students (Pearson, Muller, and Wilkinson, 2007; Horn, Szalacha, and
Drill, 2008; Winans, 2006). Blackburn and Smith (2010) worked with a teacher inquiry
group with an antihomophobia commitment, and many of the straight allies in the group
also experienced shock when they “realized the extent of homophobia and their
complicity in it until they began talking about these issues in the group and grappling
with them in their work in schools” (p. 625). Similarly, I was unaware of the
homophobia and heteronormativity that persisted in my own school. Once I became
more aware, I realized how inhospitable the school environment was to LBGTQQ
students. This experience helped extend my understanding of the heteronormative
attitude that exists in society, as well as the potentially damaging effects such attitudes
have on students. Many LBGTQQ students feel isolated, threatened, or ignored, which
diminishes their ability to succeed in school (Kosciw, 2010). This experience and the experiences of many students and teachers pushed me to develop a study that might help us better understand how to provide support for LGBTQQ students in schools.

**Statement of the Problem**

Under federal law, the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) of 1974 promises students an equal education. However, many LGBTQQ students do not receive an equitable and fair education because of the well-documented homophobia and heterosexism that exists in many schools. Whether they are verbally and physically harassed and bullied, LGBTQQ identities are not positively portrayed in the school or are completely absent from the curricula (Blackburn and Buckley, 2005; Szalacha, 2004). This creates an unequal education in contrast to their heterosexual counterparts. Surveys by groups such as the Gay Lesbian and Straight Educational Network (GLSEN) and the Human Rights Watch (HRW) reveal the damaging impact of consistently negative portrayals on student achievement outcomes. *Hatred in the Hallways* (2001), a survey conducted by the Human Rights Watch articulates these phenomena:

It can undermine students’ ability to focus at school, as well as their well-being.

When school officials routinely ignore the pervasive verbal harassment or dismiss its seriousness, they create an atmosphere that the gay students are powerless to change and from which they can only escape by dropping out of school. Although the youth we interviewed frequently focused on fear of physical and sexual violence, many noted that the experience of being called a “faggot,” “queer,” “dyke” and other slurs on a daily basis was devastating. One young gay youth who had dropped out of an honors program angrily protested, “Just because I am
gay doesn’t mean I am stupid,” as he told of hearing “that’s so gay” meaning “that’s so stupid,” not just from other students but from teachers in his school. (p. 65)

Countless schools ignore and refuse to discipline the bullying of LGBTQ students. This creates a destructive environment for LGBTQ students as well as for gender nonconforming heterosexual students who are bullied because they are perceived to be gay. In fact, “four to five as many heterosexual students experience antigay bullying than LGBT students” (Ressler and Chase, 2009, p. 18), which has more to do with the ways that peers, teachers, and schools normalize a male-female binary of gender expression (Blackburn and Smith, 2010) often resulting in bullying when students do not adhere to traditional masculine and feminine appearance, dress, or behaviors (Ressler and Chase, 2009).

Gender and sexuality are seen as synergetic phenomena; not only is the direct bias expressed against LGBTQ students but gender stereotypes reinforce homophobia and limit individuals’ self-expression by forcing men to act in ways perceived to be masculine and women to act feminine (Ten Ways Homophobia Affects 'Straight' People, 2013). Pascoe’s (2007) fieldwork in an American high school featured the following findings about gender:

Though homophobic taunts and assertion of heterosexuality shore up a masculine identity for boys, the relationship between sexuality and masculinity looks different when masculinity occurs outside male bodies. For girls, challenging heterosexual identities often solidifies a more masculine identity. These
gendering processes are encoded at multiple levels: institutional, interactional, and individual. (p. 5)

Pascoe (2007) found that attaining and maintaining masculine and feminine identities that correlate with students’ gender perpetuates homophobia and heterosexism.

Researchers emphasize the importance of administrators, teachers, and students recognizing the power differentials created through the heteronormative discourse of maintaining gender identities in order to reduce homophobia (Blackburn, 2012; Pascoe, 2007). As a result of the relentless gender and sexuality limitations enforced and biases reinforced in school, many students suffer academically (Kosciw, 2010; Pearson, Muller, and Wilkinson, 2007; Ryan, 2003). In fact, Pearson, Muller and Wilkinson (2007) found that LGBTQQ and gender nonconforming adolescents:

…are stigmatized by the school environment process. Students who do not feel a sense of belonging within their schools, or who expect that others in their school would reject them if they knew their attractions, may lose motivation to please their teachers and classmates. (p. 525)

Pearson, Muller, and Wilkinson (2007) also note that because of the stigmatization felt in school, LGBTQQ youth experience disengagement from the learning process, resulting in “lower academic performance and decreased school success” (p. 525). In addition, surveys conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) document harassment and bullying of LGBTQQ adolescents as a significant factor leading to an increase of absenteeism and high rates of school dropouts (Kosciw, 2010).
Across the country, we see the escalation of bullying - distress, duress, and violence - that young people face because they are gay, lesbian, transgendered, bisexual, or questioning their sexual orientation (Ryan, 2003). Even more troublesome is the fact that there are only a handful of positive equivalents to these negative portrayals of LGBTQ youth. In other words, although many LGBTQ youth demonstrate agency and voice, the dominant narratives portray them in roles as victims who have little power in countering discrimination.

**Research Purpose**

To address the well-documented discrimination towards LGBTQ individuals in schools, this study explored ways that negative portrayals of LGBTQ youth and homophobic and heteronormative attitudes might be altered through the incorporation of LGBTQ texts and critical discussions surrounding the texts, media stereotypes, heteronormativity, heterosexual privilege, and gender in a high school Public Speaking class. The purpose of this study was to investigate ways that curriculum in a high school Public Speaking class might utilize these critical literacy practices within a social justice curriculum to focus on LGBTQ and gender issues for the purpose of altering student attitudes, beliefs, and actions about LGBTQ people and combat the victim stereotype.

**Type of Study and Research Questions**

Using qualitative methods and an action research approach, I conducted this study in my Public Speaking class at a public high school in the southeastern United States during spring semester, 2013. Grounded in the tenets of qualitative methodologies, critical action research in particular, I explored my teaching practices in conjunction with the learning of my students. Although there are typically four units of study in the Public
Speaking class each semester, this dissertation study focused on two of those units, one on gender and another on sexuality. The questions guiding the study asked:

- What happens when a critical literacy/social justice approach to curriculum and teaching is used in a grades 9-12 Public Speaking class to support students’ examination of attitudes, beliefs, and actions regarding the discrimination against and oppression of LGBTQQQ people and related issues?

- How does the inclusion of specific texts, discussions, and assignments impact students’ beliefs about LGBTQQQ issues?

- How does the inclusion of texts, discussions, and assignments impact students’ beliefs about gender roles?

- How does the inclusion of texts, discussions, and assignments about gender roles impact their beliefs about LGBTQQQ issues?

- How does the inclusion of specific instructional strategies and texts impact students’ beliefs about LGBTQQQ people as agents versus victims?

**Significance of the Study**

The 2009 National School Climate Survey (2010) revealed some alarming statistics about the negative climate in schools for LGBTQQQ students. These findings described a climate characterized by absenteeism, lowered educational aspirations and academic achievement, and poor psychological well-being within an environment of hostility. Specifically, findings from this survey reported that:
- 84.6% of respondents were verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) at school because of their sexual orientation and 63.7% because of their gender expression.

- 40.1% of the respondents were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) at school in the past year (2009) because of their sexual orientation and 27.2% because of their gender expression.

- Respondents were more than three times as likely to have missed classes (29.1% vs. 8.0%) and 4+ times likelier to have missed at least one day of school (30.0% vs. 6.7%) in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable, when compared to the general population of secondary school students. (Kosciw, 2010, p. 18-19)

These statistics highlight the typically negative environment in schools regarding LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students and the impact of that environment on them. Federal law promises students an equal education when they step through the doors of a public school, and these statistics prove otherwise. Many other research studies highlight the negative climate in schools, as well as the impact of the climate on the emotional well-being and positive identity development of adolescents (Black and Underwood, 1998; Blackburn, 2004; Blackburn, 2012; Muñoz- Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds, 2002; Pascoe, 2007; Pearson, Muller, and Wilkinson, 2007, Ryan, 2003). These studies document the pervasive problem of the negative climate of schools on LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students, but are not primarily focused on examining solutions to improving the school climate.
Also, although the studies mentioned above bring light to the challenges that LGBTQQ students face, the research seldom portrays students who exert agency to challenge unjust and discriminatory practices. As Blackburn (2004) writes, this can perpetuate the notion that LGBTQQ students do not take a stand for themselves: “While this literature is important for exposing the ways queer youth are victimized in schools and the impact this victimization has on these young people, it also serves to perpetuate the notion that they are only victims” (p. 104). It is important to recognize the strength and agency that LGBTQQ and gender nonconforming adolescents exert in response to harassment instead of taking a deficit view of adolescents and their ability to understand complex issues and act to affect change. Therefore, work is needed to understand how teachers might, when introducing LGBTQQ topics, go beyond framing LGBTQQ people as victims (Clark and Blackburn, 2009; Muñoz-Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds, 2002). Teachers and teacher-researchers need to create and study instructional practices and curricula with the expectation that students have the ability and the insight to investigate the causes of homophobia and heterosexism (Swartz, 2003), take action to counter oppressive and discriminatory actions and institutions, and begin to see LGBTQQ peers as agents for change not merely as victims.

In addition, little work examines the role of gender and its impact on homophobia and pervasive heteronormative views in schools and society. For example, displays of masculinity often conceal homophobia in ways that are considered acceptable and normal. Through fieldwork and interviews, Pascoe (2007) found that:

For boys, achieving a masculine identity entails the repeated repudiation of the specter of failed masculinity. Boys lay claim to masculine identities by lobbing
homophobic epithets at one another. They also assert masculine selves by engaging in heterosexist discussions of girls’ bodies and their own sexual experiences. (p. 5)

In Pascoe’s study, teachers and administrators considered these practices normal and harmless, and failed to acknowledge how they reinforced strict gender roles and how damaging that could be for any student outside of the so-called normal gender boundaries (Pascoe, 2007). Findings from a report conducted by Human Rights Watch (2001) concur:

It became obvious from our research that the abuse of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth is predicated on the belief that girls and boys must strictly adhere to rigid rules of conduct, dress, and appearances based on their sex. For boys, that means they must be athletic, strong, sexist, and hide their emotions. For girls, that means they must be attentive to and flirtatious with boys and must accept a subordinate status to boys. Regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, youth who violate these rules are punished by their peers and too often by adults. (p. 90)

This work suggests that adherence to strict gender rules is detrimental to all students because it limits potentials and constricts individuals and their perceptions of each other. Therefore a study that investigates practices designed to support students’ examination of gender issues, in the process of also understanding how to better support students’ awareness of the damaging effects of homophobia, heteronormativity, and heterosexism is necessary. Studies of this nature will expand the literature that exists (Dilg, 2010) on
these topics by providing information about how students respond to a curriculum with the specific goals of changing homophobic attitudes.

Finally, widely noted in the research is the significant absence in school curricula of LGBTQ+ texts – texts that portray LGBTQ+ people and/or related issues – and critical discussions surrounding them (Banks, 2009; Blackburn and Buckley, 2005; Winans, 2006). In particular, Blackburn and Buckley (2005) note the absence of LGBTQ+ texts used in the English Language Arts classroom. The results of a survey sent to 600 U.S. public high schools were that, “of the 212 schools that responded, only 18 (or 8.49%) said that they use texts, films, or other materials addressing same-sex desire in their English Language Arts curriculum” (p. 205). Inclusion of LGBTQ+ texts is advocated by several other researchers/educators, but they argue that inclusion is not enough; critical discussions surrounding the texts are necessary (Daniel, 2007; Swartz, 2003; Winans, 2006) in order to challenge heteronormative attitudes and their negative consequences. However, few studies about incorporating the inclusion of LGBTQ+ texts in the high school English classroom include classroom discussions surrounding heteronormativity and homophobia (Clark and Blackburn, 2009). This study contributes to filling this gap in the literature by including LGBTQ+ texts in the high school curriculum and analyzing student responses to discussions centered on heteronormativity, homophobia, and gender. This builds and is inspired by Blackburn’s (2007) advocacy for:

Mak[ing] schools not places that are simply institutions to endure (or not) but spaces (Blackburn, 2003) where all students can engage in story lines that position them, and in which they position themselves, in multiple and variable ways so that they are more able to work for social change and as a result not only
the schools but also the broader worlds of these young people are better places to be. (p. 52)

Based on the discussions above, this study contributes to filling gaps in the field by building on and expanding previous studies related to LGBTQ issues. I developed gender and sexuality units and then designed this study to examine what happened when the units were implemented in a high school Public Speaking class. To address gaps regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ texts in the curricula and how examining gender informs students understanding about LGBTQ issues I designed lessons that would engage students in critical discussions surrounding texts about gender and texts about LGBTQ issues. To examine questions from the field about improving the negative school climate, I looked at how this social justice curricula which included the examination of gender and LGBTQ issues, impacted students’ homophobic and heteronormative beliefs and practices. To contribute to knowledge in the field about combating the victim-profile of LGBTQ individuals, I incorporated texts positioning LGBTQ individuals as agents and positioned heterosexual adolescents as competent to engage students in considering causes and solutions to the oppression that LGBTQ and gender nonconforming individuals confront.

**Definition of Terms**

There are several concepts that need definition to guide the reading of this dissertation. Below, I define those concepts as used in this study.

**Critical education.** Critical educational theory refers to a whole educational process grounded in critical concepts. Friere (1970) and Shor (1999) advocated for teachers and students to be co-learners to explore questions of inequity in
school and society. Critical education theory is an approach to education that highlights literacy skills to scrutinize privilege and oppression in society.

**Critical literacy.** Critical literacy takes the stance that no text is neutral (Luke and Freebody, 1997) and that readers should be positioned to examine texts to uncover normalized assumptions. Critical literacy explores issues of bias, power, privilege, and oppression in texts. Luke and Freebody (1997) explained that “critical understanding of media texts, industries, and the production of meaning, must balance discourse critique with giving students opportunities for alternative readings and text productions” (p. 41).

**Heteronormative and heterosexism.** In this study, the word heteronormative describes the way that society normalizes heterosexuality, therefore making sexual diversity abnormal. I use Blackburn’s (2012) definition:

> Adhering to social rules and regulations that privilege biological men who behave in stereotypically masculine ways, such as being attracted to women. Heteronormativity also privileges biological women who behave in stereotypically feminine ways, but not to the extent that it privileges men because imbedded in heteronormativity is misogyny. Heterosexism is a related word, but it names something more subtle: the often subconscious assumption that everyone is straight or the belief that straight people are inherently better than those who are not. (p. 3)

**Homophobia.** In this study, the term homophobia means “the fear of and/or prejudice against individuals who are perceived to experience same-sex desire” (Blackburn, 2004, p. 103).
LGBTQQ. The term LGBTQQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning, unless the literature I am quoting uses another form. There are various initialisms used in sexual orientation literature, however, I have chosen to use this one because it allows for the notion that people identify themselves in purposeful ways that may change given the context in which they are speaking, writing or interacting; this acronym offers a comprehensive umbrella of thinking at this time. Using this acronym also aligns my views with Blackburn’s (2012) definition of the acronym and its use:

I have used the acronym LGBTQQ in an attempt to be as inclusive and specific as possible. I use the term queer, the first Q, in reference to people who are not heteronormative but prefer to evade more specific classifications such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Questioning refers to one who is questioning one’s sexual identity. (p. 3)

Social Justice. In this study I use Nieto’s (2010) definition of social justice: “a philosophy, an approach, and actions that embody treating all people with fairness, respect, dignity, and generosity” (p. 46).

Texts. In this study, the term, texts, means any print or non-print materials that convey meaning. Luke and Freebody (1997) argue for “a broader notion of a cultural and technological literacy that includes a study of the intertextuality of imageries, texts, and artifacts of media and popular culture” (p. 25). Texts can be photos, illustrations, paintings, advertisements, commercials, and you-tube videos; the list is endless. In addition, Lankshear and Knobel (1997) contend, “critical literacy must extend into electronic realms its traditional interest in
exploring cases where regulation and control of information results in people being served up mis-information and dis-information to the detriment of informed participation in public spheres” (p. 138). This extends the definition of texts into the virtual world, which includes wikis, blogs, podcasts, vodcasts, and chat rooms; as technological advances are made, the list will expand, change, and grow.

**Theoretical Framework**

I drew from several overlapping theories in the development of the framework that informs my teaching, curriculum, and the purpose, design, analysis, and interpretation of data in this study. My theoretical frame is grounded in sociocultural and critical sociocultural theories, which support the examination of social justice topics. This frame requires me to understand sociocultural, political, and historical contexts of my work while engaging in research that addresses inequities and leads to action. Critical and sociocultural theories led me to the development of what I call an *oppression lens* (discussed at the end of this section) through which I interpreted and analyzed data and articulated findings and implications. Figure 1.1 illustrates the relationship between the theories that are foundational to my theoretical framework. As described in the subheaded sections to follow, the oppression lens builds from a sociocultural focus on origins, identity, relationships, and context and a critical sociocultural focus on privilege, praxis, power, agency, and oppression.
Figure 1.1 Theoretical Framework. (My theoretical framework grounded in sociocultural theory, from which critical sociocultural theory is embedded led to the creation of my oppression lens.)

**Sociocultural Theory**

Sociocultural theory is foundational to my thinking largely because of its focus on the complex relationship between context and learning, as well as the connection/transactions between teachers and learners as they develop their identities. A few elements of sociocultural theory in particular influence my work. Although I describe them individually, these concepts are inter-related and cannot be divorced from each other: origins and principles of sociocultural theory, context, relationships, and identity.

**Origins and key principles of sociocultural theory.** Sociocultural theories “are based on the concept that human activities take place in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbol systems, and can be best understood when investigated in their historical development” (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996, p. 191). Much of the framework for sociocultural theory developed from the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978) in the 1920s and ‘30s (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996). From Vygotsky’s (1978)
perspective, mental functioning of an individual is not simply derived from individual constructions of knowledge; rather, the specific structures and processes learned and revealed by individuals can be traced to their interactions with others. Wertsch (1991) listed three main principles of Vygotskian theory:

1) a reliance on genetic, or developmental, analysis. Vygotsky (1978) used genetic analysis to demonstrate how learning and development did not take place in isolation.

2) the claim that higher mental functioning in the individual derives from social life. John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) explain: “according to this perspective, learning and development take place in socially and culturally shaped contexts. Historical conditions are constantly changing, resulting in changed contexts and opportunities for learning” (p. 194); and

3) the claim that human action, on both the social and individual planes, is mediated by tools and signs” (p. 19).

Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning contexts, affected by society and culture, are social sources of development and that cultural tools shape an individual’s learning.

Vygotsky’s (1978) theories established the foundation for modern day sociocultural research.

**Context.** Sociocultural researchers are concerned with the contexts in which learning takes place and interactions within those contexts, which results in a “broad use by sociocultural researchers of approaches that examine the ways in which learning and teaching take place under different cultural circumstances and in different historical contexts, contributing to a contextualized rather than a universalistic theory of
development” (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996, p. 197). According to sociocultural researchers the location, culture, and community in which a learner exists cannot be extrapolated from the learning situation. Nieto (2010) argues: “Sociocultural and sociopolitical perspectives are first and foremost based on the assumption that social relationships and political realities are at the heart of teaching and learning” (p. 4). The political and social context shape and constrict the educational environment, and sociocultural researchers study the impact the context has on the learning relationship.

As a teacher, sociocultural theory assists me in understanding how the heteronormative context of school impacts students’ academic achievement and identity development. For example, if a student identifies as LGBTQ, the lack of positive portrayals of LGBTQ individuals in the curricula produced from an inhospitable social and political climate towards LGBTQ inclusive curricula, could explain a lack of engagement students feel about school, negatively affecting their academic achievement. Understanding how social and political contexts shape student learning guides my understanding of how to improve the educational experience for my students. I believe that, students’ views about gender and sexual orientation affect the climate that creates or destroys opportunities for all students’ success in school including the obstacles they face, or the privileges they receive. Many students experience bullying, name calling, and often violent actions because they identify as LGBTQ or they do not conform to prescribed notions of masculinity or femininity, which may cause them to disengage with the learning process, (Kosciw, 2010; Pascoe, 2007). Sociocultural theory supports my attempts to understand and articulate the relationship between gender and sexuality identity and how students engage in the school context.
**Relationships.** Understanding the relationships that exist within the learning environment is a crucial part of sociocultural research, understandings which also ground my study. Nieto (2010) explicated one of the central tenets of sociocultural theory when she explains, “learning emerges from the social, cultural, and political spaces in which it takes place, and through the interactions and relationships that occur between learners and teachers” (p. 4). The act of teaching does not take place in a vacuum; as a socioculturally-grounded teacher and researcher, it is important to reflect on and understand how the context of, my personal and professional experiences, and the relationships that I create with students are all socially, culturally, historically, and politically based. As Gay (2010) explained, “teaching is a contextual, situational, and personal process: a complex and never ending journey” (p. 22). Understanding how the context in which we exist mitigates my relationship with students, helps to elucidate the impact I have on students’ learning immediately and how those relationships continually shape my own learning and growth as a teacher.

Sociocultural researchers also believe that knowledge is co-constructed between learners using a variety of tools (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996). Vygotsky (1978) detailed the theory: “It is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (p. 86). Thus, the process of learning is co-constructed through language and dialogue, the cultural tools of mediation, which are essential to shaping action (Wertsch, 1991). The relationship between teacher and learner is vital to comprehending the co-construction of knowledge. In this way, sociocultural theory strengthens my
understanding of how to scaffold students through relationship-building as foundational to our discussions about social justice topics. In this study, this was an important foundation as I worked to support student learning about gender and LGBTQ people and issues through personal reflection, dialogue, and relationships with students and myself.

Mediation. Sociocultural researchers not only concentrate on the context and relationships through which learners’ identities are constructed and perceived, but the interaction between the context and how learners acquire that knowledge. Gregory, Long, and Volk (2004) established the importance of our interactions with others to knowledge acquisition: “Critical to a sociocultural approach is the role of the mediator (a teacher, adult, more knowledgeable sibling or peer) in initiating children into new cultural practices or guiding them in the learning of new skills” (p. 7). My identity as the “mediator” of knowledge is important to recognizing how I approached preparing for student learning and balancing my simultaneous position as expert and learner. At the same time, it is important that I acknowledge the role of the students, the texts, and other materials as mediators in the learning process.

Reflections on my role as one mediator in this study have been important to developing as well as understanding findings from this study. From the beginning, I established myself as a mediator to guide students in the examination of their beliefs. To engage students in discourse surrounding challenging topics, I had to prepare myself through research and reflection about my own beliefs and bias (explored in Chapters III and IV), in order to be an effective mediator in the classroom. Awareness of this social
process allowed me to facilitate my students’ learning as they were also impacted by social and political forces.

**Agentive identity.** Developing an ally or agentive identity is another crucial facet to sociocultural theory. While some assign this characteristic to critical theory, it has been an implicit tenet of sociocultural theory for decades. Wertsch, del Rio, and Alvarez (1995) wrote that “sociocultural studies should be involved in changing and not just examining human action and the cultural, institutional, and historical settings in which it occurs” (p. 29). This stance toward change reflects another important foundation of my work—engaging students in reading and discussing texts about LGBTQ students as more than merely victims and developing an ally identity.

This focus on action brings a more explicitly critical component to the way I think about sociocultural theory, as I created the curriculum to avoid a victim-sympathy response from students and included texts to promote agentive acts. It was important for all students to feel a sense of agency in addressing the social injustices that we discussed to avoid a feeling of helplessness; therefore, including a focus on taking action throughout the course and developing an agentive identity was crucial and derived from my sociocultural perspective. I grounded my belief system in this view: I feel a responsibility to support my students in recognizing social, cultural, and political perspectives in order for them to explore their own identities and come to value the identities of others.

**Critical Sociocultural Theory**

Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007) wrote that a sociocultural lens becomes critical when researchers pay explicit attention to issues of privilege, disprivilege, power, and
discrimination within a narrowly defined societal norm. This expands on sociocultural theory by encouraging “sociocultural researchers to better understand the way that performances of social identity and learning through social interactions are cloaked in the fabric of power and ideology and economics” (p. 8). Specifically, critical sociocultural theorists attempt “to generate a sociocultural theory that accounts for these larger systems of power as they shape and are shaped by individuals in particular contexts” (Lewis, Enciso, and Moje, 2007, p. 9). Identity, agency, and power are topics that permeate critical research, but merging sociocultural beliefs with critical ideas shape an important theoretical shift that combines the focus on the social nature of learning, valuing multiple perspectives towards justice and equality, especially in education.

My own critical stance permeated my classroom as I integrated explicit instruction about power, privilege, and oppression and chose texts that explored those constructs in hopes that it would inspire students to exert agency against oppression, focusing in particular on helping them recognize and challenge oppression, specifically about LGBTQQ issues. A critical sociocultural stance was also at the foundation of the development of this study. I set out to explore classroom possibilities for combating oppression.

Four aspects of a critical sociocultural stance are foundational to the theoretical frame that drives this work. Those aspects are explained in the following sections as I discuss power, privilege and oppression, praxis/change, and agency and the role of those concepts in the convictions that undergird this study.

**Power.** Power is a significant element in critical sociocultural theory that includes individual and social/institutional power (Gee, 2000; Giroux, 1983; Giroux, 1997; Hooks,
According to Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007) power “is produced and enacted in and through discourses, relationships, activities, spaces, and times by people as they compete for access to and control of resources, tools, and identities” (p. 17). Examining how power, gained through social and cultural forces, influences individuals and groups of people to uncover how they shape personal beliefs and societal structures and the ways institutions function is one of the foundational ideas of my teaching. Defining and investigating power and dominance maintained through one’s societal beliefs is crucial to altering negative beliefs about LGBTQ and gender nonconforming people that permeate the school in which I teach. Identities are multifaceted; therefore, power that people and institutions possess and exert varies depending on the people involved, the context, and the time. Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007):

…take the position that people in both advantaged and targeted groups have a critical role to play in dismantling oppression and generating visions for a more socially just future. The specific standpoints of particular social groups are valuable places to begin. Groups of people who share targeted status can build solidarity, articulate an analysis of power from the particular vantage point of their group, use this to analyze policies and practices that support oppression, and generate alternatives to the status quo. Coalitions among different groups can then develop these strategies further by drawing on the energies, differential insights, and diverse avenues to power of coalition members. (p. 14)

By examining existing power constructs, the status quo can be deconstructed, and emancipatory actions can potentially increase. I believe examining power and relationships with students will lead to agency and action toward a more just world.
Giroux (1997) explained how power functions in most educational institutions:

“Dominant educational discourses fail to analyze how the school as an agent of social and cultural control is mediated and contested by those whose interests it does not serve” (p. 131). Many schools ignore the needs and well-being of many marginalized students when they fail to conform to dominant cultural expectations. When students uncover beliefs they hold and question normalized practices in institutions, especially regarding LGBTQ and gender nonconforming individuals, I believe they will also uncover the prejudices, beliefs and routines that lead to unjust power structures that oppress LGBTQ and gender nonconforming people.

**Privilege and oppression.** Key to my theoretical foundation is a view of privilege and oppression. Adams, Anne, and Griffin (2007) defined privilege as “unearned access to resources (social power) only readily available to some people as a result of their advantaged social group membership” (p. 59). Oppression is seen as a result of inequitable structures, policies, and practices in society that allow advantaged members of society to maintain power and privilege (Adams, Anne, and Griffin, 2007; Lewis, Enciso, and Moje, 2007; Nieto, 2010). For example, McIntosh (1988) explained the role of privilege in society, writing that “the silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tools that keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these subjects taboo” (p. 6). Winans (2006) explained further: “Whether students occupy a majority position because of their race, class, gender, religion, or sexual orientation, the impact of that privilege typically remains unnoticed, and how knowledge supporting that privilege is constructed often remains unclear to them” (p. 108). Teaching about
LGBTQQ topics required that I explicitly drew students attention to heterosexual privilege and oppression. Studying the process of my teaching meant that I was able to use the privilege of my role as a teacher and researcher to better understand how oppression might be addressed in schools.

**Heterosexual privilege and oppression.** Research that explores heterosexual privilege and oppression considers the phenomenon of heteronormativity – views of being heterosexual as being natural and neutral perpetuated by most of the systems that undergird the institutions in which human beings operate every day- which generates a cycle of oppression by marginalizing anybody who is not heterosexual. Schools and school systems are two of many institutional structures that are heteronormative; others include governmental agencies, health care agencies, welfare programs, military, and faith-based institutions.

Understanding the cyclical and institutionally perpetuated nature of heterosexual privilege and oppression of LGBTQQ students is a key to my belief system and at the core of the curricula that I created and the study I designed. As I consider critical theories and the notions of privilege and oppression, the framework for this study is enriched by work that describes most institutions including schools as heteronormative (Blackburn and Smith, 2010). Blackburn (2012) defined heteronormativity as:

Adhering to social rules and regulations that privilege biological men who behave in stereotypically masculine ways, such as being attracted to women. Heteronormativity also privileges biological women who behave in stereotypically feminine ways, but not to the extent that it privileges men because embedded in heteronormativity is misogyny. Heterosexism is a related word, but
it names something more subtle: the often subconscious assumption that everyone is straight or the belief that straight people are inherently better than those who are not. (p. 3)

The urgency of my work is guided by the knowledge that most schools work under the assumption that all students and parents are heterosexual contributing to a heterosexist and homophobic atmosphere (Donelson and Rogers, 2004; Sieben and Wallowitz, 2009) that oppresses LGBTQQ and gender nonconforming students. Yet, schools do not disrupt heteronormativity, often failing to recognize it, and in doing so, create a cycle of oppression for LGBTQQ students and parents. Swartz (2003) declared: “The naturalization of heterosexuality must be challenged if no child is to be left behind in the educational system” (p. 66).

Like these scholars, I believe that, in order to challenge heteronormativity, first schools must realize how heteronormativity functions in the school, that it is a problem, and that the problem must be rectified. I have witnessed firsthand how oppression in the school creates a negative impact on LGBTQQ students, leading to concerns about the unequal academic advantage for heterosexual students who often have higher academic achievement, lower absenteeism, and privileged social status in school (Pearson, Muller, and Wilkinson, 2007).

I also believe that a heteronormative environment is not only damaging to LGBTQQ and gender nonconforming students, but to heterosexual students as well. Blackburn and Smith (2010) explained:

It promotes gross civil rights abuses against LGBT individuals and forces limitations upon straight women and men in that it insists that boys and men
behave in masculine ways, including but not limited to being attracted to girls and women, and that girls and women behave in feminine ways, such as by being attracted to boys and men, among other expectations of girls and women. (p. 627)

The normalization of heterosexuality and de-normalization of LGBTQQ students by individuals and institutions reinforces narrowly-defined gender roles and can perpetuate bullying for anyone who challenges stereotypical masculine and feminine ways of acting and dressing (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Contesting norms in my classroom was a way for students to understand the power, privilege, and oppression that exists in society. I believe that examining the role of privilege and oppression in society made students conscious and knowledgeable of the normalized oppressions that exist and enabled students to challenge them.

**Heteronormativity and homophobia.** Heteronormativity and homophobia are inter-related concepts that perpetuate the oppression of LGBTQQ and gender nonconforming individuals. It is important to my belief system to differentiate between the two concepts, because the curriculum I developed focused on institutional causes of oppression, not personal prejudice. Heteronormativity is enforced through institutions and cultural/societal groups. On the other hand, the cultural function of homophobia capitalizes on an individual’s fear and prejudice of LGBTQQ and gender nonconforming individuals. Griffin, D’errico, Harro, and Schiff (2007) explain the role of homophobia further:

Homophobia plays an important role in maintaining the boundaries around what our society considers “normal” gender and sexual identity and expression. When people violate these gender and sexuality norms, homophobia is one of the
primary tools that is used to let people know they are “out of bounds.” The narrow construction of gender and sexuality we have learned to accept as normal and natural depends in part for its maintenance on stigmatizing lesbians, gay men, bisexual people, and transgender people. (p. 205)

Although homophobia occurs at an individual level and heteronormativity occurs at an institutional and cultural level, they work together to maintain oppression of LGBTQ+ and gender nonconforming individuals.

The curriculum that I created for students was grounded in educating students about the cycle of oppression created by providing privileges to advantaged groups, specifically in the sexuality unit privileging heterosexuality, and the result of providing advantages and disadvantages to certain groups based on their social group membership. It was important to me to focus students’ attention on institutional oppression to avoid labeling individuals as homophobic, which often deflects the responsibility of all individuals to interrupt heteronormativity. I challenged students to understand the privileges that are provided to individuals that adhere to normalized gender and sexuality expressions at an institutional level in order to complicate their understanding of gender and sexuality at a personal and social level.

Praxis/change. Praxis is a term coined by Freire (1970) meaning “theory and practice; it is reflection and action” (p. 125). According to Freire, the constructs of power, privilege, and oppression must be accompanied by reflection followed by action, which is a key concept in critical sociocultural theory and a necessary step toward transformation. Engaging students in reflection on their learning and growth about power and oppression and ways to combat and change social injustices is significant to my
teaching and reflects the critical sociocultural lens I used to create the curriculum used in the Public Speaking course and the lens used to design the study and analyze data. In addition, I engage in continual reflection as I consider my students’ opinions, literature in the field, and observations of my classroom. I use those reflections to take action to alter my teaching each year in my classroom. Promoting reflection on growth and progress is an essential component to my teaching that assists students in examining their personal views and changes in perceptions regarding social justice issues. In this study, we did this with a specific focus on LGBTQQ issues.

Agency. Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007) defined agency as “the strategic making and remaking of selves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources, and histories, as embedded within relations of power” (p. 18). I use this concept to help me understand and articulate ways that negative depictions of LGBTQQ individuals often misrepresent them as victims instead of individuals capable of agency. My strong convictions, supported by this body of work, allowed me to create an LGBTQQ inclusive curriculum that portrays LGBTQQ individuals as agents, rather than victims. Particularly in education, researchers write that acknowledging agency of LGBTQQ people is helpful for teachers as they frame discussions with students about LGBTQQ issues to move beyond the victim stereotypes that permeate the media and society (Blackburn, 2012; Blackburn and Smith, 2010). As Rofes (2005) commented, “we can see queer youth and other outsiders as vulnerable or fragile, but we can also see them as daring, powerful, and rebellious” (p. 2). It was important to me to position LGBTQQ individuals as agents in the curriculum to combat the victim stereotype.
The Oppression Lens

Drawing on sociocultural and critical sociocultural theories, I developed an oppression lens through which I created, conducted, and analyzed data from this study. I defined it as the awareness of and reflection on relationships within the learning context and how they shape, and are shaped, by instruction that investigates the concepts of power, privilege, and oppression. The oppression lens that I developed uses praxis, agency in the form of reflection and action, and an understanding of the oppression cycle to challenge social injustices originating from oppression. Figure 1.2 illustrates the connections between the major concepts within the oppression lens framework that guides this study: oppression cycle, agency, and praxis. The oppression cycle portrays the role that institutions and social power play in producing unearned privileges to particular groups, simultaneously oppressing other groups. Individuals have personal power, or agency, that either perpetuates or interrupts the cycle of oppression. The oppression lens I developed is specific to educational settings; therefore, I consider praxis instrumental to encouraging students to assert their agency to interrupt oppression. Praxis in the classroom relies on the core elements of building relationships with students, creating critical instruction, and providing a supportive learning context.
Oppression cycle. Central to an oppression lens is critically investigating the concepts and relationship between power, privilege, and oppression. I draw from Adams, Anne, and Griffin’s (2007) definition of oppression:

We use the term *oppression* rather than discrimination, bias, prejudice, or bigotry to emphasize the pervasive nature of social inequality woven throughout social institutions as well as embedded within individual consciousness. The term *oppression* encapsulates the fusion of institutional and systemic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry, and social prejudice in a complex web of relationships and structures that shade most aspects of life in our society. (p. 3)

Oppression of a targeted group is a result of, not only an individual’s bias and prejudice, but the normalization of mainstream societal norms ensured through policies and
practices of social institutions that privilege particular groups and simultaneously
disprivilege others (McIntosh, 1988). Complicity in supporting systems that provide
unearned privileges to advantaged groups means simultaneously playing a significant role
in perpetuating oppression.

The setting for this dissertation, a public high school, offers a concrete example
for understanding the oppression cycle. As stated earlier, educational institutions are
generally heteronormative environments giving unearned privileges to heterosexual
students (Blackburn, 2012; Pascoe, 2007). For example, heterosexual students are
represented in curricular content in the numerous traditions such as the election of prom
king and queen, and normalized heterosexist discourse including jokes and metaphors
between teachers and students (Pascoe, 2007). These privileges are some of the ways
that heterosexual students benefit from the expectation by the educational institution that
heterosexuality is the norm, which is regulated by school rules, policies, and social
interactions among administrators, teachers, and students. Concurrently, LGBTQQ and
gender nonconforming students are not represented in the curricula, school rituals, and
positive teacher and student discourse. As a result, LGBTQQ and gender nonconforming
students are ostracized, silenced, and bullied by the regulation of sexuality by the
educational institution and the individuals within the school (Kosciw, 2010; Pearson,
Muller, and Wilkinson, 2007). While some teachers and students intentionally contribute
to the normalization of heterosexuality in school contexts, some are unaware of the
unconscious role they play in the larger social institution as they perpetuate
heteronormativity and the resulting oppression of LGBTQQ and gender nonconforming
students (Griffin, D'errico, Harro, and Schiff, 2007).
Agency. Agency is using personal power to interrupt instead of perpetuate oppression. The instructional strategies that I used to facilitate student knowledge development that are significant to my oppression lens are: creating an environment that supported critical inquiry (learning context), using inquiry based instruction that challenged normative views about sexuality (instruction), developing relationships with students, and reflection. Using these tools I attempted to encourage agency and develop students into allies who interrupt instead of perpetuate oppression.

Interrupting and perpetuating. Oppression and systems of domination often remain invisible and internalized, which is why many educational institutions continue to perpetuate the oppression of LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students. Interrupting the oppression of LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students requires a concentrated effort to dismantle. Interrupting oppression requires the complication of an individual’s entrenched beliefs that are diffused through the systematic actions of social institutions. Revealing, identifying, and questioning underlying assumptions that perpetuate oppression is one way that individuals can begin to interrupt oppression (Freire, 1970). As such, this lens was essential to the creation of my study through which my students and I questioned the normalized beliefs that permeated our subconscious using critical analysis and discussion to combat injustice, specifically toward LGBTQ and gender nonconforming individuals.

Conclusion to Chapter I

Immediate action is necessary to renovate the culture of educational institutions regarding equal educational opportunities for LGBTQ students. The increased media attention to the Gay Civil Rights Movement (Licata, 1981) has intensified attention to
LGBTQQ students as has the legalization of same sex marriage in a number of states, but both have failed to protect them from bullying and harrassment or from enjoying normalized identities in schools and in society. This is not new as the urgency of this work has been suggested for decades (Licata, 1981). LGBTQQ and gender nonconforming students are at risk verbally and physically in schools (Kosciw, 2010; Ryan, 2003). Their risks are physically, psychologically, and academically-centered violating the promises and goals of the schools they enter (Kosciw, 2010). Researchers suggest that interrupting homophobia and heterosexism by using critical discussions along with an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula has the potential to challenge homophobia and the heteronormative environment of many schools (Daniel, 2007; Swartz, 2003; Winans, 2006).

This study aimed to understand how students engage with a social justice curriculum that encourages them to use critical literacy skills to confront and uncover their beliefs and attitudes about gender and sexuality with the desire to decrease homophobia, heteronormativity, and increase acceptance of people who are gender nonconforming and LGBTQQ. Using action research and a critical sociocultural framework, this study examined the process of introducing students to concepts of power, privilege and oppression, praxis/change, and agency to alter negative perceptions, ideas, and beliefs about LGBTQQ identities as well as to encourage students to challenge their normalized beliefs about gender and sexuality to reduce homophobia and heterosexism. While the study set out to focus on gender nonconforming individuals as well as LGBTQQ individuals, the emphasis of the dissertation is on LGBTQQ issues with less discussion about issues of gender. This chapter provided an overview of the purpose and
significance of the study, as well as the theoretical frame used to design it, and analyze and interpret data. The following chapter reviews the theoretical literature and studies that are foundational to this study.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

The review of the literature in which this study is situated is organized into two sections: (a) critical educational theory, and (b) oppression lens. The review of critical educational theory includes its origins and the key components of several critical pedagogies, specifically: critical literacy, democratic education, social justice education, culturally responsive education, and multicultural education. These are all approaches that reflect a commitment to supporting students’ abilities to analyze and critique social inequities and attempt to challenge unjust aspects of society. These critical pedagogies provide an important theoretical foundation to this study because of the curricular focus that I hoped would encourage students to identify oppression and silencing with regard to LGBTQQQ issues, bringing silenced voices to the forefront to consider action to affect change.

The review of critical educational theory is followed by a discussion of the key components of the oppression lens, introduced in Chapter I. I defined this lens as the awareness of and reflection on relationships within the learning context and how they shape, and are shaped, by instruction that investigates the concepts of power, privilege, and oppression. The theory and research reviewed here isolate the concepts central to an oppression lens that traverses the research across the critical pedagogies described in the previous section. They are presented here to situate my investigation as building from within existing work. An oppression lens uses Freire’s (1970) definition of praxis to
understand how teachers can encourage a sense of agency in students to challenge social injustices. This section of the literature review, examines a sampling of theoretical work and research studies, organized around three components of my oppression lens: Agency, Oppression Cycle, and Praxis. The review of literature—both theoretically and empirically—builds from, but also informs, the ongoing development of my oppression lens. The studies reviewed in this section provide recent and relevant research conducted in the field that demonstrates what happens when theory is put in practice, illuminating the work that is still to be done if we are to understand how to create classroom environments with the potential to combat homophobic and heteronormative norms. I reviewed these studies to provide an overview of the work that laid the foundation for this study.

**Critical Educational Theory**

Critical educational theory refers to an educational process that contests oppression with the goal of liberation. Freire (1970) proposed the development of literacy skills to scrutinize privilege and oppression in society and take action to overturn unjust institutions, policies, and practices. I drew predominantly on Freire’s (1970) work to create a framework for this study because his theory focuses on liberation through education. I relied on his stance because I wanted my students to scrutinize heteronormativity in our society, to become aware of the resultant oppression of LGBTQQ students, and to take action.

**Origins and Definition**

Giroux (1983) explicates his views about the theoretical foundation for critical perspectives: “The concept of critical theory refers to the nature of self-conscious critique and to the need to develop a discourse of social transformation and emancipation that
does not cling dogmatically to its own doctrinal assumptions” (p. 8). Critical theory centers on concepts of social change through analysis and interrogation. It originated in neo-Marxist traditions of the Frankfurt school by theorists Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and Erich Fromm and was revised to modern critical theory by second generation Frankfurt school theorists that included Jürgen Habermas (Edgar and Sedgwick, 2008). Critical theory developed as a way to critique and change society instead of just reporting about it (Edgar and Sedgwick, 2008).

Edgar and Sedgwick (2008) explained:

The critical theorist is aware that the way in which he or she sees the world is conditioned, not least by the political ideological structures of society. Critical theory is therefore self-reflective. Its enquiry encompasses not just the society that is “out there,” seemingly independent of the observer, but also the way that society shapes and distorts the perception of society. Critical theory is therefore a form of ‘ideology critique’—that is to say that it is not simply an analysis of the social conditioning of knowledge (as is found in the sociology of knowledge), but also a recognition of power structures inherent in that conditioning. (p. 130)

Although critical theory examines and questions issues of equity and access across human society, it has been adapted to educational theory, with the goal of the transformation and liberation of oppressed people. The cannon of critical theorists that I mention above were predominantly White and male, portraying the absence of marginalized scholars in critical emancipatory theory. The silenced voices of marginalized scholars illustrates the social power of race, gender, and sexuality within academia, even when universities focus on eliminating oppression (Giroux, 1983).
Focus on oppression. Central to critical educational theory is its focus on challenging oppression. Freire (1970) explained:

This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both. (p. 44)

Freire (1970) advocates for education that will liberate the oppressed and the oppressors. Bell (2007) defines the term oppression as “the fusion of institutional and systemic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry, and social prejudice in a complex web of relationships and structures that shade most aspects of life in our society” (p. 3). Bell’s definition undergirds a view of oppression that grounds all social injustices as part of an intricate web of relationships. Central to critical pedagogies is the aspiration to challenge oppression through education.

Critical Pedagogies

The research that supports LGBTQQ inclusive classrooms draws from various critical pedagogies: multicultural, democratic, culturally responsive, and social justice pedagogies. Dover (2013) illustrates the connection among these educational theories, each of which I used to build the framework that supported this study. Figure 2.1 demonstrates how these theories contribute and draw from each other to support teaching for social justice, and in this case, an LGBTQQ inclusive curriculum.

Because an LGBTQQ inclusive curriculum was foundational to this study, it was important to review work that supports the inclusion of voices traditionally oppressed in
systems of education. Thus, I drew from pedagogical/theoretical models reflected in Dover’s outline to develop strategies for facilitating the inclusion of LGBTQQ literature and topics in the high school classroom. These critical pedagogies, derived from critical educational theory, employ a critical lens that challenges oppression. The following sections review the theories in Dover’s graphic that explore critical literacy, democratic education, social justice education, culturally responsive pedagogy, and multicultural education. I address the definitions and key components of each theory in this section to
illustrate how these critical pedagogies address oppression theoretically to lay the foundation for the oppression lens in the following section.

**Critical literacy.** Critical literacy practices are emancipatory and used to confront oppressive traditions by analyzing power, privilege, bias, and oppression in texts. Critical literacy theorists (e.g., Luke and Freebody, 1997) wrote that texts are never neutral and are always motivated. They believed that there is no neutral position from which a text can be read or written. All texts represent some version or vision of the world that privileges certain perspectives, specifically of particular classes, genders, or cultural groups. Critical literacy is “a social practice in itself and is a tool for the study of other social practices. That is, critical literacy is reflective and reflexive: Language use and education are social practices used to critically study all social practices” (Shor, 1999, p. 10). When readers take a critical literacy stance, they interrogate texts from multiple viewpoints and name systems of domination at work in the texts they read and in their worlds. Critical literacy studies examine the textual practices that students and teachers use to analyze a text and learn about concepts of power, privilege, and oppression.

**Democratic education.** Democratic education focuses on civic preparation and aims to prepare students to live in a democracy (Dewey, 1938/2004), and I take a critical perspective toward democratic education. It is critical when specific attention is paid to political issues, specifically social justice and equity for every citizen within a democracy (Drinkwater, 2013). Drinkwater (2013) defines critical democratic theory as “education or learning as an on-going, two-way, dialectic process that is built around the experiences of the student and allows for critical thinking and action to help students grow” (p. 1).
Critical democratic theory posits using dialogue to encourage students to question and challenge societal norms embedded in our society (Drinkwater, 2013).

**Social justice education.** In *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, Bell (2007) defined social justice education as:

An interdisciplinary conceptual framework for analyzing multiple forms of oppression and a set of interactive, experiential pedagogical principles to help learners understand the meaning of social difference and oppression both in the social system and in their personal lives. The goal of social justice education is to enable people to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part. (p. 2)

Social justice education integrates features of democratic education, with an emphasis on sociopolitical issues viewed with an oppression lens (discussed in the following section). Social justice education scrutinizes equity issues in society, and in a classroom setting offers approaches to consider inequitable constructions in our society. Social Justice Education (SJE) is a transformative practice that presents students with experiences to facilitate their understanding of power, privilege, and oppression.

**Culturally responsive education.** Ladson-Billings (2009) and Gay (2010) use the term culturally relevant pedagogy, and recent scholarship uses the term culturally sustaining pedagogy, (Paris, 2012). However, Stairs’ (2007) use the term culturally responsive, which I have found most accurately reflects my beliefs about culturally
appropriate teaching. Culturally responsive pedagogy shares many of the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy, for example empowering “students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ladson-Billings 2009, p. 20), Stairs (2007) explained:

The difference is that culturally responsive teachers make explicit the issues of race, ethnicity, and culture as central to teaching, learning, and schooling, a stance not often evident in more homogeneous, suburban teaching contexts. Interrogating and inquiring into the relationships among race, power, and privilege is typical in culturally responsive classrooms. (p. 38)

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) theory focuses on the importance of teachers forming relationships with students and using their home literacies to create bridges to school literacies (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009), generating engaging curriculum built upon students’ cultural lives to challenge oppression within their communities.

**Multicultural education.** Multicultural education shares many of the tenets of critical, democratic and culturally responsive pedagogies (Banks 1997; McDonald and Zeichner, 2008; Nieto, 2010; Sleeter, 2008). Nieto’s (2010) definition of multicultural education moved the field beyond a celebration of cultural holidays and heroes and highlights the significance of critical pedagogy:

Multicultural education is a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. Multicultural education
permeates schools’ curriculum and instructional strategies as well as the interactions among teachers, students, and families and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning. Because it uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflection, and action (praxis) as the basis for social change, multicultural education promotes democratic principles of social justice. (p. 68)

Although multicultural pedagogy and curricula are implemented differently in every classroom, Nieto’s (2010) definition offered a comprehensive definition of multicultural education that correlates to the goals and purpose of this dissertation.

In practice, multicultural education often becomes a “heroes and holidays approach to diversity” (Nieto, 2010) where the focus is on famous people and holidays or festivals of various cultural groups. Banks (1997) identified four levels of multicultural education that explain the varying ways schools implement multicultural education. The first level, the contributions approach, encompasses cultural holidays, notable minorities, and their contributions to society. The second level, the additive approach, includes concepts, themes, and perspectives, but does not change the curriculum. In level three, the transformation approach, educators alter the structure of the curriculum so that students can view concepts and themes from diverse views. Level four, the social action approach, allows students to choose a problem, make decisions, and take action to solve it (Banks, 1997). While there are growing numbers of critical and social justice oriented approaches to multicultural education such as those that Banks posited, these methodologies are in the minority and struggle to maintain traction in public schools that are focused on standardized scores (Nieto, 2010; Sleeter, 2008).
The tenets of multicultural education and the critical pedagogies previously described offer a foundation of theoretical and pedagogical principals for an LGBTQ inclusive curriculum. Theorists, researchers, and practitioners understand and employ a critical lens and focus on oppression in varying ways resulting in deviations among theorists, researchers, and practitioners, sometimes superficially focusing on diversity that reinforces the status quo and failing to acknowledge the core concepts of critical educational theory from which these approaches are derived.

**Oppression Lens**

The oppression lens that I used as the theoretical framework that guided this study evolved from my understandings and convictions grounded in critical sociocultural theory and the previously described critical pedagogies. The inter-related concepts that transverse the critical pedagogies and underpin the oppression lens were described in Chapter I and graphically represented in Figure 1.2, illustrating how I see these concepts working together. To recap, in my oppression lens model, agency is the goal of critical education. In order to drive agency, students must understand the oppression cycle, especially the concepts of institutional and personal power, to interrupt oppression. Praxis, reflected in Freire’s (1970) ideas about action based on reflection, is the tool students and teachers use to interrupt oppression. The following sections review first the theory that grounds each component of the lens: agency, the oppression cycle, and praxis. In each section, the theoretical discussion is followed by a review of research that provides valuable insights into these concepts and that undergird the creation, execution, and analysis of data from this study. Because an LGBTQ inclusive curricula grounded in an oppression lens were central to this study, I framed the following sections around
what we can learn from critical pedagogies. Then I specifically look at how critical pedagogies incorporate an oppression lens in an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula: agency, oppression cycle, and praxis.

Agency

Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007) defined agency as “the strategic making and remaking of selves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources, and histories, as embedded within relations of power” (p. 18). Agency is when individuals or groups of individuals believe that they have the ability to take action against injustices, which is the goal of critical education, and central to an oppression lens. Critical theorists and researchers espouse the importance of individual agency and their power to create change in society. Although social change is the goal of critical education, there are challenges that thwart teachers from engaging in critical pedagogies that focus on transforming society. The following sections address social change and challenges.

Social change. Critical education considers transformation in communities and societies one of the purposes of education. Dewey (1964) explains, “The school is the primary and most effective interest of social progress and reform” (p. 438). Dewey (1964) elaborates in My Pedagogic Creed: “Education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and with the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction.” (p. 437). Critical pedagogies affirm that social change drives education.

Social change in practice. According to Cammarota and Romero (2011), one of the objectives for critical educators is to support students in working for social change. Their study used Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects with Latino high school
students to support student’s social action in their community. The students in the PAR project developed and implemented a research study for the purpose of improving conditions in their social context using qualitative methodology and share the results of their study with others in the class and community. In PAR "Communities of inquiry and action evolve and address questions and issues that are significant for those who participate as co-researchers" (Cammarato and Romero, 2008, p. 1). The researchers found a positive impact on the students in the study:

The cases of Arnulfo, Elena, and Yolo demonstrate how PAR serves as a funds-of-knowledge bridge between the classroom and the students’ realities. Students document through research their experiences with campus security, AP courses, or language acquisition. Students present their experiences with the intention of making necessary institutional change, including policies that allow for the display of appropriate cultural symbols, the expansion of racial diversity within AP programs, and the promotion of waivers for schools needing bilingual instruction. (Cammarato and Romero, 2008, p. 503)

PAR offers a way for students to use their funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, 2005) in conjunction with school based literacy to produce changes in their district, city, and state.

Singer and Shagoury’s (2005) study also illustrated how students in a diverse English Language Arts curriculum in a public urban high school in Southeast Portland, Oregon, used literacy to challenge social inequalities and advocate for social change. Singer and Shagoury (2005), co-teachers and co-researchers, worked with two ninth grade classes building a curriculum grounded in developing student’s knowledge about social activists. They read literature individually and with the whole class, engaged in
reading and writing workshop to improve literacy skills, and in a culminating activity, contributed to a gallery where they displayed their own social activism projects based on their individual passions. Singer and Shagoury (2005) determined, “The students’ passion and commitment to their ongoing projects demonstrated both political imagination and ability to use literacy to exercise agency in the world” (p. 338). The students in the study experienced growth and change in themselves that extended into the world. Although the findings from this study are promising, critical education is not without its challenges.

**Challenges.** Critical educators face obstacles in many educational institutions as they attempt to disrupt normative societal views to interrupt oppression and create social change (Freire, 1970). This section highlights the obstacles that researchers identify to meeting the objectives of a critical education with the aim of transforming society, teachers identify as hindering their attempts at critical education, and challenges specific to an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula, and how to address these challenges. These sections include: teachers and critical-political spaces, resistance, challenges to incorporating LGBTQQ literature, and addressing the challenges.

**Teachers and critical-political spaces.** Critical pedagogies concentrate on interrupting oppression, requiring critical classrooms to become critical and political spaces in order to create agents of social change (Freire, 1970). Researchers of critical pedagogies identified inconsistencies between critical theory and teachers’ beliefs and actions about the critical and political nature of teaching and classroom interactions (Bender-Slack, 2009; Bender-Slack, 2010; Dover, 2013). Bender-Slack (2009) argued that adopting critical pedagogy to negotiate old and new literacies to teach for social
justice improved teacher education. The researchers contended that “if teachers do not critically read the canon and the cultural models that it represents, it becomes problematic in terms of teaching for social justice through a critical theory lens” (Bender-Slack, 2009, p. 273). However, when they asked the sample of 22 teachers to define social justice, they described social justice as fairness and equity. They found instead that the teachers in the study failed to identify critical aspects central to social justice education.

Another study conducted by Bender-Slack (2010) interviewed 22 secondary teachers about their views on social justice education and found that while participants had a sense of agency, understood the nature of oppression, and acknowledged the political role of teaching, they did not trouble the literary canon, aim to change students’ minds, or discuss power in their social justice teaching. The study indicated teachers as being complicit in negating the notion that schools and classrooms are political spaces. These studies highlight the need to invest more time in developing critical lenses with students and teachers and overcoming challenges presented in the school environment (Bender-Slack, 2010; Damico, 2005; Dover, 2013).

Dover (2013) expanded on Bender-Slack’s (2009) work by studying social justice pedagogy from teachers’ perspectives. Participants in the study consisted of 24 teachers from 13 states who self-identified as social justice teachers. Dover (2013) used an open-ended questionnaire and asked participants to submit a social justice standards-based lesson plan. Dover’s (2013) participants also identified the components of SJE curriculum, pedagogy, and social action:

Teaching for social justice requires curriculum that (1) reflects students’ personal and cultural identities; (2) includes explicit instruction about oppression,
prejudice, and equity; and (3) makes connections between curricular standards and social justice topics. Second, teaching for social justice employs pedagogy that (1) creates a supportive classroom climate that embraces multiple perspectives, (2) emphasizes critical thinking and inquiry, and (3) promotes students’ academic, civic, and personal growth. Third, teaching for social justice makes connections between education and social action through (1) teachers’ sense of themselves as social activists, (2) teachers’ intent to raise students’ awareness of inequity and injustice, and (3) teachers’ intent to promote students’ social action. (p. 93)

Unfortunately, the teachers in Dover’s (2013) study did not consider their classes as political spaces and never mentioned power, a crucial aspect of critical education.

**Resistance.** Research indicates that teachers fail to create critical-political spaces because they face resistance. The teachers in Dover’s (2013) study expressed multiple ways their teaching was thwarted by restricted curriculum and policy, lack of support from colleagues, and resistance from students. The participants in Bender-Slack’s (2010) study disclosed fear and safety as the reasons they failed to challenge the educational system. Other teachers face resistance from administration and students, for example the teacher in Milner’s (2005) study. Milner (2005) studied an African-American teacher, Dr. Wilson, who taught in a predominantly White suburban high school and specifically looked at her process of developing a multicultural curriculum. Dr. Wilson integrated multicultural literature and experiences that investigated culture because she felt that the other teachers in her school were unconcerned with those issues, a stance that also created a feeling of ostracism for her in department meetings. Dr. Wilson established
herself as a teacher and learner within her classroom by modeling the tentative nature of learning through reflection, developed all students’ academic skills using a rigorous multicultural curriculum, helped students understand others through collaboration with an empathetic lens, and opened up new ways of student thinking through dialogue. Her work was not without challenges: students accused her of being racist and prejudiced, which led administration to remove her as a freshman teacher, and her administration and colleagues did not support her. Dr. Wilson felt her persistent desire to address and encourage students to be change agents, especially regarding race, led to her reassignment from freshman to seniors.

Similarly, Ukpokodu (2003) also struggled to gain support from the university that employed her to teach a multicultural curriculum to pre-service teachers. Ukpokodu (2003) conducted a self-study as she engaged a class of predominantly White, working-class, conservative, pre-service teachers in a curriculum that aimed to help them discover the hidden curriculum of power, privilege, and oppression in schools. Ukpokodu (2003) required students to shadow and study a student who was from a culture different than their own to discover the discrepancy between their perceptions about a culturally different person and the reality of that person’s life. Ukpokodu (2003) encountered verbal resistance from students that resulted in low evaluations and had a negative impact on her tenure, but she also received positive feedback on the affirmative impact of the class and the assignments. Although the challenges of the class persisted, Ukpokodu (2003) believed in her course:

Even as I struggle with the reputation of being known, among students, as ‘hard,’ and ‘critical,’ I will not trade it for the world. At least, at the end of each
semester, I leave with a clean conscience knowing that I led them to the promised land” (p. 23).

Although the teachers in these studies faced multiple challenges, they resisted the temptation to conceal their agendas of working toward a just world. Many of these obstacles are parallel to the challenges of incorporating LGBTQ inclusive curricula.

**Challenges to incorporating LGBTQ literature.** Within the literature regarding implementation of LGBTQ issues and texts in school curricula, researchers noted the challenges many teachers confront when teaching LGBTQ literature (Thein, 2013). This included the fear of losing their jobs, concern about unsupportive student, parent, and administrative reactions, having little to no training, and being opposed to, or uncomfortable with, talking about sexuality in school (Smolkin and Young, 2011; Thein, 2013). In the literature I reviewed, I found that issues of fear, unpreparedness, and lack of knowledge were major findings in the research.

**Fear.** Thein’s (2013) study of 20 K-12 teachers reported:

Most of the discussion engaged in by most of the participants concluded that LGBTQ texts could not or should not be taught in language arts classrooms, even though the majority of the participants had neutral or positive stances toward LGBT people and issues” (p. 172).

Thein’s (2013) participants indicated that they thought it was not their job; they feared how others would respond (parents, students, administration), and that it was unfair to those who hold anti-gay views. While researchers Smolkin and Young (2011) rebuked silencing LGBTQ topics, declaring it is “an unacceptable educator action” (p. 223), they also noted fear, inappropriateness of the topic, and lack of training as challenges for
teachers to incorporate LGBTQQ texts in their classrooms. Likewise, Kumashiro’s (2004) study of 30 future teacher educators also indicated fear as one of the objections to teaching LGBTQQ issues. The future educators felt that sexuality issues should be addressed at home, not school because it was too risky in today’s political climate.

Unpreparedness and lack of knowledge. Thein’s (2013) study also found that teachers felt ill-prepared to teach LGBTQQ literature and were not well-versed in LGBTQQ contributions to literature. In addition, teachers in Kumashiro’s (2004) study felt that they should not impose their own values onto students, and some felt the teacher preparation programs did not train them to teach about those issues.

Addressing the challenges. Although the research literature indicates that there are ample reasons that teachers do not include LGBTQQ topics in their curricula (Clark and Blackburn, 2009; Curwood, Schliesman, and Horning, 2009), theorists challenge those reasons and provide suggestions for teachers. Curwood, Schliesman, and Horning (2009) proposed being proactive when selecting LGBTQQ novels. They suggested focusing on curriculum and standards first, knowing the policies and procedures for choosing and challenging texts, and seeking support from administration beforehand. The literature also suggests that texts should not be limited to young adult novels, but should include films, news stories, memoirs, and information regarding sexual orientation when studying LGBTQQ authors (Daniel, 2007). Other helpful advice comes from Ressler and Chase (2009) who wrote, “Instead of assuming hostile environments, we need to sort out which of the dangers we fear are real and which are imagined” (p. 18). For example, Thein (2013) found that teachers avoided teaching about sexuality because they feared administration and parent disapproval, but other researchers (Sieben and Wallowitz,
2009; The Respect-For-All Project: GroundSpark, 2008) argued that there is administrative and parental support for LGBTQQ inclusive curricula. Furthermore, Clark and Blackburn (2009) urged:

Such work is political and challenges inequitable power dynamics….Because we are always learning, we must be prepared to make mistakes, reflect on them, learn from them, and improve on them. (p. 31)

There are many routes a teacher can pursue to incorporate LGBTQQ themes into his/her classroom. The classroom is a dynamic place; therefore, reflecting, critiquing, and learning from the experiences has the greatest potential to make progress. Bender-Slack (2010) offered ways for teachers to assert themselves as SJE educators to overcome those challenges:

1. Resist the particular concern for student comfort and safety.

2. Recognize the classroom as a political space.

3. Give representation to canonical works and contemporary novels.

4. Teach ELA preservice teachers how to critically choose texts.

5. Make agency a focus in teacher education programs that encourage social justice teaching.

6. Engage preservice and practicing teachers in ongoing reflection regarding the role of ELA teachers.

7. Teach discourse theory and reader response possibilities. (p. 196-199)

Bender-Slack’s (2010) list of possibilities for overcoming challenges in an SJE curriculum is applicable for addressing challenges to other pedagogical methods that meet resistance, including an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula.
Oppression Cycle

It is imperative for educators implementing an LGBTQQ inclusive curriculum to understand and combat the root causes of oppression in order to disrupt heteronormativity and homophobia in educational institutions. Therefore, I reviewed theory and research that demonstrates how educational institutions use power and privilege to marginalize students and how the cycle of oppression is interrupted using personal power and privilege.

Institutional power and privilege. Educational institutions perpetuate a deficit view of marginalized students and their families, including LGBTQQ students, to maintain power and privilege for advantaged groups. The following sections review theory about deficit views of students and families and deficit views of LGBTQQ students, followed by research on combating deficit views of students and combating deficit views of LGBTQQ students.

Deficit views of students and families. Many educational institutions and traditional teaching practices encourage the marginalization, deficit views, and stereotypes of disenfranchised groups (Compton-Lilly, 2004; Gay, 2010; Kinloch, 2010). Compton-Lilly (2004) summarized the problem:

Unfortunately, teachers, like most members of our society, are unaware of how systems of power operate in our schools and classrooms. We fail to recognize and challenge established ways of positioning people and labeling our world. Too often children in urban communities are viewed as deficient, difficult to teach, uncooperative, and troubled. Their parents are perceived as uninterested, complacent, subliterate, lazy, and negligent…in all societies, those people who
control the society through money and might are the ones who are vested with the ability to label and explain the circumstances of others. Unfortunately, these systematic ways of understanding the world deny the existence of alternative interpretations and explanations for the experiences of students and their families. (p. 16)

Educational institutions rarely expect teachers to question normalized assumptions about marginalized groups or the deficit views of students and their families (Compton-Lilly, 2004; Gay, 2010; Kinloch, 2010).

Deficit views of LGBTQQ students. Silence around LGBTQQ topics perpetuates deficit views of LGBTQQ students (Blackburn, 2012). Multiple research studies note the absence of LGBTQQ individuals, topics, and instruction in the school curriculum, which sends a message to all students that “homosexuals never did anything worthwhile, and gay and lesbian adolescents interpret the message to indicate that they probably will not make a significant contribution to society” (Daniel, 2007, p. 76). Although theorists support the inclusion of LGBTQQ people and topics to combat homophobia and help LGBTQQ students develop positive identities, teachers rarely include them in their curricula (Clark and Blackburn, 2009). Curwood, Schlesman, and Horning (2009) explain, “one of the key ways that schools condone homophobia is by failing to include LGBTQQ literature in the curriculum” (p. 38). Educational institutions propagate homophobia and heteronormativity by not including LGBTQQ literature in the curriculum propagating deficit views of LGBTQQ students.

Combating deficit views of students. Johnson’s (2011) study portrayed her learning and disrupted the commonplace assumptions and deficit view of students that
teachers make about student behavior. Johnson (2011), an outsider researcher, observed a high school English class, specifically studying a rambunctious student named Simone who was often in trouble for speaking her mind. When Simone’s classroom teacher shared information about a media event that led to the cancelation of the student published anthology, Simone enacted literacies that shifted audience, genre, and mode of communication that may have seemed disruptive or contrary to many teachers but demonstrated a critical identity that Simone created. Johnson (2011) wrote that Simone, a tenth grader, “illustrates ways people perform less audible/visible critical literacies, especially when critical voices are not privileged” (p. 27). She suggested that teachers begin looking at the ways students inherently “denaturalize power relations in their lives” (p. 40) and look beyond the traditional ways students enact critical literacy.

**Combating deficit views of LGBTQQ students.** Recent research on the dichotomy that positions LGBTQQ individuals as victims versus agents of change in their lives (Blackburn, 2012; Blackburn, 2004; Muñoz-Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds, 2002; Ryan, 2003), combats deficit views of LGBTQQ students by highlighting their agency. Researchers Muñoz-Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds (2002), Ryan (2003) and Blackburn (2004) agreed that the deficit view of these students highlighted the need to emphasize their agency and resiliency. Blackburn (2004) undertook a qualitative study of three adolescents that highlighted their agency beyond school and discovered that, “while all three students were victims of heterosexism and homophobia in schools, they were also agents” (p. 104). Although the three participants did not enact agency in school sanctioned ways, they were agents outside of school.
Another study conducted by Blackburn (2007) consisted of two focus groups and individual interviews of the six participants about their school experiences, and she found that students often positioned themselves on a continuum between victim and agents of change. Two students refused to position themselves as victims in the interview, yet Blackburn (2007) recognized that “such a singular, cohesive identity prevents them from taking stances that make schools better places for them to be” (p. 51). On the contrary, the youth with whom Blackburn (2007) worked who claimed positions as agents and victims situated themselves better to work for social change. This study exposed an alternative to the victim/agent dichotomy, and positioned LGBTQQ people as agents, while acknowledging the suffering that many people endure because of homophobia. These studies problematize the victim-agent dichotomy, highlighting the agency of LGBTQQ individuals, in order to combat deficit views perpetuated in educational institutions.

**Personal power and privilege.** Teachers committed to interrupting the cycle of oppression use their personal power and agency. Teachers are in a unique position to use their privilege as an authority figure to challenge oppression with their students, in their classroom, and in the community. According to theory and research, building on a foundation of relationships is the cornerstone of encouraging students to interrupt oppression. This section reviews the theory from culturally relevant pedagogy that advocates relationship building between teachers and students in order to challenge oppression followed by research studies that illustrate how teachers use relationships in their classrooms. Although the following theory and research is not specific to LGBTQQ
students, I believe relationships are fundamental for challenging oppression with students, and supporting LGBTQQ students in school.

**Building on a foundation of relationships.** Theorists insist that in order for all students to engage in the material and routines of school they must feel valued and capable; therefore, the relationship between students and teachers needs to be positive and encouraging (Compton-Lily, 2004; Dantas and Manyak, 2010; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Gay (2010) wrote:

> Teachers can no longer be dispassionate and distant in their relationships with students, or attempt to avoid controversial topics and harsh social realities. Nor can they focus on students’ limitations instead of their strengths and potentialities. They can no longer find solace in beliefs that their teaching responsibilities are limited to academic skills and textbook content. These are important, but genuine caring involves much more. Teachers must be involved in students’ lives; accept that teaching and learning are holistic enterprises; and teach knowledge and skills students need to negotiate in the society that currently exists, and to construct a better one for the future. They must always place students in learning environments and relationships that radiate unequivocal belief in their promise and possibility. They cannot wait until students are teenagers in middle and high school, or young adults in college, before beginning this pursuit. (p. 52)

Proponents of culturally responsive pedagogy believe the majority of students come to school with many home literacies, as well as with families who believe in their success and abilities to achieve in school (Dantas-Manyak, 2010). Culturally responsive pedagogy advocates for teachers to be responsible for taking on the supportive role that families
have provided and to encourage students to have positive self-identities (Compton-Lily, 2004, Ladson-Billings, 2009, Gay, 2010). Gay (2010) wrote:

People’s sense of self is affected profoundly by significant others in their lives, including caretakers, teachers, peers, and media portrayals. Reflected images that are positive generate feelings of worth, dignity, competence, and confidence that can facilitate academic, personal, social, and professional achievement. Negative ones lead to self-denigration, doubt, uncertainty, and feelings of unworthiness that can be impenetrable barriers to school success. These are powerful challenges and invitations for culturally responsive curricula and instruction. (p. 150)

The literature on culturally responsive teaching encourages educators to learn about students beyond their test scores and to forge relationships with their families in order for them to achieve academic success. (Compton-Lilly, 2004; Dantas and Manyak, 2010; Gay, 2010; Kinloch, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lamont Hill, 2009).

**Relationships in action.** Culturally responsive pedagogy also advocates for teachers who are committed to building relationships in the larger school community. Xu’s (1999) study aimed to understand how a middle school in a high poverty and diverse community reached out to students and families, and conversely how the students and families reacted to and interpreted school approaches to connect to families. The school used a variety of approaches to build relationships with students and families, which included festivals, teamwork in athletics, multi-age grouping, advisory classes, parent/child/teacher conferences, awards, field trips, hands on projects, and expanded learning opportunities. Through a series of interviews, field notes, and artifactual data collection, the researcher found that parent criticism derived from the good intentions of
the school. Rather than the activities that the school planned, parents wanted to share their opinions on policy and instructional changes. The study determined that teachers and schools “need to ‘hear’ more than the static profiles of children and families, before they enter a school or a classroom. They need to be aware of the cultural views and life circumstances which children and their families bring to the school” (Xu, 1999, p. 13). Xu’s (1999) study affirmed the necessity of building bridges and opening communication between parents and the school.

In order to bring further awareness of families’ cultural views and enhance the unity between families and schools, increased dialogue between school and families is an unquestioned necessity. For example, Stanton and Sutton (2012) wanted to improve the relationships and engagement between families and school in a Native American community. The study took place in several communities on, and bordering, reservations in the Intermountain West. Teachers in the study used projects, such as Elder Interviews and Photovoice, to “bridge forms of literacy, content areas, and genres while supporting collaboration, engagement, and action within the larger community” (Stanton and Sutton, 2012, p. 83). The Elder Interviews were conducted by Native and non-Native students in traditional, alternative, and virtual schools in the area. Students recorded and transcribed interviews conducted with Elders in the Native community. The Photovoice project centered on the tensions that arose when a non-Native store opened on the reservation. The project was conducted with Native American high school students who captured pictures of their relationship with food, which resulted in multiple discussions, writing projects, critical thinking and social action (boycott). Stanton and Sutton (2012) documented how the teachers and students formed attachments to community mentors to
navigate “cultural missteps” (p. 82), learned about the community and surrounding area in which they lived, and engaged with community members in ways that they previously had not. Bringing the students’ home community into the school community reinforced and improved engagement and motivation for the students in this study, and bridged the gap between student home literacies and school literacies.

**Praxis**

Praxis is a tool that guides teachers and students in their quest to transform society, which is the goal of critical education and central to an oppression lens. The term *praxis*, coined by Freire (1970) and meaning reflection and action, is a key component to his theoretical stance toward critical education. When referring to oppressive structures, Freire states: “To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51). Freire (1970) continues to explain the cyclical and recursive nature of praxis: “Reflection–true reflection–leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection” (p. 66).

Praxis is the foundation of critical education practices in problem-posing education. The next sections review instructional strategies pertinent for interrupting oppression: critical stance, critical curricula, and critical tools.

**Critical stance.** Creating critical classrooms equipped to address oppression with a goal of transformation requires a critical stance. I found that three distinct concepts addressed by critical theory were particularly supportive for developing a critical stance in an LGBTQQQ inclusive curricula. Those areas are described in the following sections: problem posing education, naming, multiple viewpoints, and critical stance in LGBTQQQ
inclusive curricula. Research portraying the use of a critical stance subsequently follows: critical stance in action and critical stance in action in an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula.

**Problem-posing education.** Freire (1970) defines problem-posing education as “constituted and organized by the students’ view of the world, where their own generative themes are found” (p. 109). Generative themes allow students to pose a problem and critically explore a topic that is pertinent to their lives, and the role of the instructor is to embed literacy practices in instruction and encourage dialogue to critically examine the students’ chosen topic (Freire, 1970). Problem-posing education encourages students to apply their literacy skills in a context of a dilemma that has an immediate impact on their lives with the goal of awakening students’ critical consciousness through the investigation. In problem-posing education, the instructor’s role changes from delivering content to propelling students toward liberation by supporting their literacy practices as they explore topics which impact their lives. Friere (1970) instructs teachers to “abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world” (p. 79).

Problem-posing education is in direct contrast to the banking model of education, in which knowledge is defined as: “...a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry” (Freire, 1970, p. 72). Freire (1970) asserts the banking model is representative of domination and oppression—the primary generative theme most students identify. The student in this scenario is an empty vessel waiting to be filled, through the teacher’s depositing of information, which does not take
into account the knowledge, background, and situational contexts of the student. Critical theorists such as Freire (1970) encouraged learners to interrogate problems in their communities in order to resolve them and to name them.

**Naming.** Critical education seeks to notice and name oppressions and injustices with the intention of revolutionizing society. Freire and Macedo (1987) expected teachers to facilitate students in naming their world:

What is important to recognize here is the need to reconstitute a radical view of literacy that revolves around the importance of naming and transforming those ideological and social conditions that undermine the possibility for forms of community and public life organized around the imperatives of a critical democracy. (p. 5)

Other critical theorists also believe that students must notice what is going on in the world through their lived experiences and name the problems and ideologies that dominate society to create a just world (Freire and Macedo, 1987; Lewison, Leland, and Harste, 2008).

**Multiple viewpoints.** Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) and Luke and Freebody (1997) encouraged students and teachers to engage in activities and discussions that suspend judgments and opinions and to take on perspectives that are different from their own. Luke and Freebody (1997) maintained: “The point is that a critical, cultural and social literacy, one that includes a critical understanding of media texts, industries, and the production of meaning, must balance discourse critique with giving students opportunities for alternative readings and text productions” (p. 41). Critical theorists explain that when students use critical social practices to analyze texts from different
viewpoints, they sometimes experience conflicting feelings because it challenges naturalized views that they may have (Freire, 1970). Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) explained further, “Tension is a plus that goes hand in hand with diversity and difference and opens up spaces for more voices to be heard” (p. 67). Tension drives the learning process as well as initiates new ways of thinking.

**Critical stance in LGBTQ inclusive curricula.** Critical literacy is the most common approach used to incorporate LGBTQ lessons and materials in the classroom. Banks (2009) wrote:

> A critical literacy approach requires that we address more than the violence. Learning to read is always about more than just “word calling”; it is about the ways that we learn the language for describing ourselves, for narrating ourselves into existence, for articulating our needs, values, and value in the spaces that we need to survive in. (p. 34)

Critical literacy skills can be used to engage students in an investigation of how the texts are created, what is left out of each text, how our culture and society effect their reading of the text, and determine what action needs to take place in order to make any changes. A critical lens also allows students to challenge gender and sexuality expectations, as well as questioning labels and how they are used to control and create powerful hierarchies (Ellis, 2009; Sieban & Wallowitz, 2009).

In addition to critical literacy, critical theorists (Banks, 2009; Freire, 1970) advocate reading texts from multiple viewpoints. For example, Banks (2009) suggests, “part of our work can be to encourage students to read the available texts both empathetically and critically, aware of the contexts that bring these books into existence
and how changes in our culture could provide more positive, complex experiences for us all” (p. 36). Reading texts empathetically allows students to enter a world they wouldn’t normally encounter. A critical stance in an LGBTQ inclusive curricula draws from critical education, examining texts from multiple viewpoints and with different lenses.

**Critical stance in action.** Teachers who utilize a critical stance use a variety of strategies to create a classroom that concentrates on injustices significant to students’ lives, naming injustices, and viewing injustices from different viewpoints. One such study is Seher’s (2011) study that advocated for the inclusion of students’ interests to transform a strictly regulated curriculum. Seher altered a unit using Tim O’Brien’s (2009) novel, *The Things They Carried*, (a text chosen by the administration, not the teacher) into an engaging unit where the students collaborated with social activist Bill Ayers and wrote their own personal war stories. One student in particular, Wilfredo, was disengaged from school because of the powerlessness he felt in the face of administration, and the unit allowed him to use his school experiences to name the oppression he felt. Seher (2011) noted, “He gained a constructive sense of agency through participating in our class project” (p. 185). Using students’ experiences and encouraging them to make choices with relevance to their own lives and name the oppressions they experienced, reframed how students viewed school. Seher (2011) suggested, “Student voices should be recognized and used to effect educational change” (p. 186). Seher’s (2011) study demonstrated how teachers who use a critical stance can use student experiences to create meaningful learning opportunities that promote change in students’ learning.
**Critical stance in an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula in action.** Much like Seher (2011), researchers Blazar (2009), Winans (2006), Young (2009), and Zanitsch (2009) promote the use of a critical stance as a way for teachers to engage students in questioning conventional norms about sexuality, scrutinize concepts of privilege, power, silence, heteronormativity, and homophobia, and push students’ boundaries to explore conflicts in their own beliefs. Winans (2006) explains the powerful ways that teaching critical thinking contributes to teaching about sexuality:

> Teaching critical thinking entails helping students to become more conscious of their discursive affiliations and the implications of those affiliations, especially when they conflict with one another. We need to consider how epistemologies work differently within various discourse communities: how is knowledge produced, how is ignorance bound up with knowledge, what questions are and aren’t asked—and what are the consequences of this? Queering our pedagogy ultimately means an ongoing, radical questioning—of ourselves, our students, our institutions, and our world. (p. 119)

Blazar (2009) and Zanitsch (2009) used a critical stance, asking students to name and address concepts related to sexuality from multiple viewpoints through dramatizations including exploring the social experiences LGBTQQ individuals encounter. Young (2009) also employed a critical stance in her own classroom, encouraging students to choose a problem specific to their school community, resulting in the choice of addressing homophobia and heteronormativity in their school. In addition, her students named the oppression of LGBTQQ individuals, enabling them to resist and compromise
with administration who initially denied their class project, A Day of Solidarity, to spread awareness of LGBTQQ issues.

**Critical Curricula.** A critical curricula uses students’ experiences, interests, motivation, challenges, and concerns to create the content of the classroom. Consequently, this section addresses: student voice and choice, student voice and choice in an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula, student voice and choice in action, student voice and choice in action in an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula.

**Student Voice and Choice.** Critical curricula focuses on students experiences, which demands that learners are active participants in the learning process, which is crucial when students are actively seeking to understand political and social issues. According to Dewey (1938/2004), “when education is based upon experience and educative experience is seen to be a social process, the situation changes radically” (p. 59). He continued by defining the importance of experience:

> Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into. The greater maturity of experience which should belong to the adult as educator puts him in a position to evaluate each experience of the young in a way in which the one having the less mature experience cannot do. It is then the business of the educator to see in what direction an experience is heading. There is no point in his being more mature if, instead of using his greater insight to help organize the conditions of the experience of the immature, he throws away his insight. Failure to take the moving force of an experience into account so as to judge and direct it on the ground of what it is moving into means disloyalty to the principle of experience
itself. The disloyalty operates in two directions. The educator is false to the understanding that he should have obtained from his own past experience. He is also unfaithful to the fact that all human experience is ultimately social: that it involves contact and communication. The mature person, to put it in moral terms, has no right to withhold from the young on given occasions whatever capacity from sympathetic understanding his own experience has given him. (p. 38)

Drawing from students’ lives to create experiences that impact their learning is the center of a critical curricula (Dewey, 1938/2004; Dover, 2013). Critical pedagogy propels educators to create environments conducive to questions that explore why something is happening in a student’s life or community and whose interest it might be serving. Honoring each student’s experiences reveals the often unexamined tensions embedded in their lives. By encouraging critical perspectives in the classroom, however, students can examine critical principles of society that lead to social change.

**Student voice and choice in an LGBTQQ inclusive curriculum.** In the same way that a critical curricula uses students’ experiences as the core content of a critical classroom, employing an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula requires incorporating LGBTQQ topics to eliminate the silence of LGBTQQ individuals. There are varieties of ways that schools and classrooms can become LGBTQQ inclusive. Uribe (1995) contended that a “gay friendly” curricula should “include gay and lesbian topics in their individual classes whenever relevant and appropriate” (p. 208). Lipkin (2004) asserts, “Teachers should not underestimate the importance of simply mentioning LGBT people when discussing diversity. For students just to hear the words in an unembarrassed and accepting tone
contradicts the notion that the topic is forbidden or shameful” (p. 201). In addition, theorists suggest including LGBTQ texts.

**LGBTQQ Texts.** Theorists (Banks, 2009; Blackburn, 2012) suggest that literature study is an important way for students to engage with LGBTQ people and topics in non-threatening ways. Historically there has been an absence of the use of LGBTQ literature in the English classroom, but currently the amount of young adult literature featuring LGBTQ characters is improving and increasing (Banks, 2009). Banks (2009) also discusses the nature of LGBT texts that have not been available until recently, stating that “the message is hard to miss: LGBT characters are most useful if they’re dead or gone. This is not the reality that students need” (p. 35). Currently, there are more selections available in young adult literature that challenge readers to “understand them as fuller human beings with thoughts, desires, and interests that may mirror their own and that are not necessarily silenced by novel’s end” (Banks, 2009, p. 35). Many publications offer lists of young adult literature with LGBTQ themes (see Table 5.2), including summaries and critiques of the books (Blackburn and Buckley, 2005; Clark and Blackburn, 2009; Letcher, 2009; Walling, 2003). Curwood, Schlesman, and Horning (2009) also created a list of recommended LGBTQ novels for middle and high schools and reiterate the importance of changing the curriculum despite challenges presented by parents and administrators. Walling (2003) also asserts the importance of inclusive text choices in the English classroom:

Stories allow children and adolescents to enter worlds that contrast with theirs, worlds in which they can experience vicariously the realities, whether close or contrived, of others who may be quite different from them. But stories also may
allow readers to find themselves, to see others who are like them and who struggle with the same kinds of problems. This aspect of identification is equally important, especially for students dealing with gay and lesbian issues, because they may not have access to such identification in their own realities. (p. 98)

Unfortunately, including texts alone cannot break down homophobia (Banks, 2009), but it is imperative to a critical curriculum and LGBTQ inclusive curricula.

**Student voice and choice in action.** As noted previously in the theory section, a critical curriculum is not prescribed, it is generated by each teacher with his/her students. One theme that was consistent throughout the studies was a focus on how the critical curriculum created by each teacher incorporated students’ voices and improved their learning. The studies portrayed how students learned from a curriculum that was flexible and was designed to meet their concerns. Many of the studies conducted in English Language Arts classrooms used a variety of texts within a critical curriculum. One example of using student centered topics for instruction is Camanigan’s (2008) study which used performance poetry as a liberatory practice, finding that it enhanced the learning experience for marginalized students. In other examples, Nagle (1999) studied work ethic, religion, and gender roles; Cuff and Statz (2010) and Brannon (2010) explored consumerism, and Camanigan (2008) studied the origin of the Black Arts Movement. Brannon (2010) explained:

> Critical literacy doesn’t offer a prescribed way of teaching-it isn’t a commodity, it isn’t something that a teacher “does.” Rather, critical literacy is what a teacher enacts. It is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that places, reading, writing, and questioning at the center so that students and teachers can read, write,
and learn together. The act of collaboration and the building of community replace sorting and competition. (p. 5)

The curriculum in these studies was as much about the way the students and researcher approached the topic as it was about the topic itself, beginning with choosing concepts that were valuable to students and continuing with a critical examination.

Similarly, Epstein’s (2010) study created a curriculum based on her students’ interests. Based on two eighth grade students, she advised teachers to alter their pedagogy to scaffold learning opportunities based on her beliefs that: “Students deeply engage in democratic life when they design projects that address authentic concerns, sharpen their political outlook through the critical analysis of texts, and connect to multiple audiences that can partner with them” (p. 370). Giving students an opportunity to choose topics, courses of study, and research to conduct in which they are interested motivated them to analyze a text from a socio-political lens.

Pre-packaged curriculum and test preparation materials bombard low-performing school districts, schools, and students, lowering students’ engagement and motivation to learn (Stairs, 2007). To increase student motivation, Grace’s (2004) study emphasized the importance of improving students’ academic performance by incorporating cultural practices from students’ lives, situating the teacher as co-learner, and creating a safe and trusting learning environment. Grace’s (2004) study took place in Ansaria Tasneem’s sixth grade class of 25 students in a diverse high poverty school. Tasneem infused hip-hop culture and storytelling into literacy lessons to build on the linguistic abilities of many of her African American students. Based on Grace’s (2004) experience in Tasneem’s class, she documented, “Such experiences, particularly for students who
struggle with school-based literacy activities due to disengagement, serve to motivate African American students and can make learning more relevant and literacy skills more attainable” (p. 488). The themes students studied—African American oral traditions and beauty and self-identity—using collaborative dialogue—were relevant to students and therefore motivated them to become part of the learning process.

Stairs (2007) also encouraged teachers to move beyond test preparation and skill and drill in his analysis of two preservice teachers who conducted a lesson as part of their internship. The lesson took place in a ninth grade ELA class of 28 students in a high poverty and extremely diverse Boston school. Within a class study of the Harlem Renaissance, teachers built on students’ strengths to adapt instruction and to address elements of racism and prejudice using the poetry of Langston Hughes. Stairs (2007) promoted CRP explaining that “the students’ positive response to the numerous learning opportunities in an 80-minute English block should be evidence enough for the value of culturally responsive pedagogy” (p. 42). Increasing their motivation with the use of cultural referents, the teachers also used popular rap songs to engage students in poem analysis and make connections to classical jazz music from the Harlem Renaissance.

Street (2005), a high school English Language Arts teacher, used student knowledge and cultural resources of the diverse students in his class in their writing assignments as a way to understand and value their diverse funds of knowledge. In a striking example, one student, Norma, used her writing to address the decrepit elevators in her apartment building. Using her literacy skills from class she initiated a letter writing campaign and was able to get the elevators fixed, which revealed the symbiotic nature of accessing student knowledge and its impact on students. Street (2005)
confirmed, “It was only by allowing students to write about topics of their own choosing that I gained access to their hidden areas of expertise. As I provided them with supportive feedback on their writing we slowly began to establish a sense of mutual trust” (p. 23). Street found that integrating content that was valuable to students and their lives motivated their progress in achieving academic skills. These studies highlight the success of grounding a critical curricula in the interests, motivations, and culture to develop students’ academic skills, simultaneously addressing critical concepts central to an oppression lens.

**Student voice and choice in an LGBTQ inclusive curricula in action.** Vital to critical curricula in an LGBTQ inclusive classroom is confronting homophobia and heteronormativity. Across the studies, researchers noted the importance of examining heterosexual privilege with students (Winans, 2006; Young, 2009). Winans (2006) taught in a rural Lutheran-affiliated Northeastern liberal arts college where sexuality was typically silenced. Winans (2006) espouses the importance of discussing heterosexual privilege, especially with heterosexual students, because “it offers them a framework for beginning to understand and identify the discourse communities from which many of their beliefs and assumptions emerge” (p. 109). Young (2009) brainstormed privileges that heterosexuals take for granted, like having fairy tales and children’s literature depict their sexual orientation and having their sexual orientation presented as normal. Those discussions led to an awareness of heterosexual privilege and an action project to raise awareness. Young (2009) and Winans (2006) agree that engaging students in discussions surrounding heterosexual privilege allows students to understand how systems of oppression are created through normalizations of gender and sexuality.
**Critical Instructional Tools.** Critical instructional tools are the methods of instruction that support teachers and students as they investigate content in a critical curricula. The primary tools encouraged by critical theory are dialogue and reflection. For this reason, the subsequent sections review theory and research in the following areas: dialogue, dialogue in action, dialogue in an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula, reflection, reflection in action, reflection in an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula.

**Dialogue.** Freire (1970) notes the importance of dialogue as a way to learn with and from each other about critical issues: “Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (p. 92-93). Dialogue is an encounter between people, an effort to name the world in order to transform it. Freire (1970) explicates: “If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings” (p. 88). Dialogue is an instructional tool that engages two or more people in an interactive process of solving a problem, expanding individual knowledge, and testing hypotheses.

Freire (1970) writes that dialogue in the classroom should position the teacher as a learner along *with* students, not the teacher as the authority of preordained knowledge. He states: “The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach” (Freire, 1970, p. 80). Critical educational theory posits that if student agency is to be produced, dialogue between teacher and student should be mediated by mutual respect and not power. A teacher who wants her students to think critically “cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned
with reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication” (Freire, 1970, p. 77). In fact, when teachers take a problem-posing stance toward education, dialogue is equivalent to thinking.

**Dialogue in action.** Research studies of teachers using dialogue as an instructional tool are extensive; therefore, I reviewed and organized the following studies according to the benefits included in the findings: denaturalize hierarchies, work through difference, and dialogue in LGBTQ inclusive curricula.

**Denaturalize hierarchies.** Johnston-Parsons (2010) conducted a study in which dialogue offered a method to neutralize hierarchies and makes spaces for groups of pre-service teachers, mentor teachers, and university supervisors to collaborate. The study took place within a school-university collaborative project (1992-2002) in which school teachers and university professors attempted to work through tensions associated with the differences between school and university cultures. The project aimed to create a collaborative model for the supervision of inservice teachers in which the mentor teacher worked hand-in-hand with the university supervisor and teacher candidate to create a unique learning experience for each individual student. Dialogue was central to the weekly Thursday night meetings as the joint venture continued. They established shared norms for dialogue, but the democratic environment was achieved through collaboration where everyone’s opinions mattered and “there was mutual goal setting as well as reciprocal learning through dialogue” (Johnston-Parsons, 2010, p. 291). Johnston-Parsons (2010) found that the most productive learning came from working through diversity and difference between the school teachers and university professors and that
“collaboration is not an end goal but a process” (p. 291). The process of collaboration served as a way to eliminate the university/school hierarchy that often limits progress.  

Work through difference. Metzger, Box, and Blasingame (2013) investigated Andrea Box’s multicultural high school literature class through observations, surveys, and interviews and noted the positive impact of aiding students in negotiating through difference. Students in Box’s class studied topics and themes about Native Americans (specifically from the Navajo, Apache, and Yaqui tribes) that were relevant to their interest and lives. They read about Native American history, researched Native American tribes they were interested in, presented their research to the class, and reflected on their experience and learning in the class. Metzger, Box, and Blasingame (2013) found that “students saw how studying multicultural literature helped them to understand their own and others’ culture, which in turn increased not only tolerance but also understanding in important social contexts in school and in their lives after school” (p. 57). Studying Native American culture assisted their development in appreciating diversity.  

Kraver’s (2007) study also found success using dialogue to view gender-equity from different perspectives. Kraver (2007) worked with undergraduate preservice and graduate inservice teachers as they created a unit for secondary students around the topic of gender equity. Kraver (2007) modeled the Literature Response Model (Brown and Stephens, 1995, p. 216-227) using literature based on social issues like homelessness, race, and youth violence. In turn, students created a unit plan with lessons on a social issue of their choice. Kraver (2007) illustrated the possibilities of integrating gender equity issues into a secondary school curriculum using excerpts from his students’ unit
plans. Kraver (2007) noted: “discussions, such as those prompted by the gender-equity units can sensitize students to such issues and compel them to consider their own and society’s response to such situations” (p. 73). The unit plans utilized dialogue to promote understanding of gender equity. Increased tolerance of diversity is also a theme that filters through LGBTQQ literature.

**Dialogue in LGBTQQ inclusive curricula.** Researchers Blazar (2009) and Zanitsch (2009) used dialogue in conjunction with dramatizations with their students to foster a comfortable environment and eliminate barriers while students grappled with their own contradictions and feelings about LGBTQQ topics. Blazar (2009) engaged his Senior English class, comprised of a predominantly Dominican student body, in the play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1993) by Tony Kushner. Throughout the course of reading the play, students chose one of the five main characters to follow and portray and often students interacted among each other in the roles of their characters. Following the role-play, students discussed their interactions and characters. Blazar (2009) found that role-playing and dialogue “encouraged an openness and ease for conversation because students had the help of someone else’s words and viewpoints” (p. 82). Dramatizations and dialogue encouraged students to engage in discussions about LGBTQQ topics.

**Reflection.** Critical education theorists and social justice educators believe reflection is a valuable tool that makes individuals metacognitive about their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and attitudes (Adams, Bell, Griffin, 2007). LGBTQQ theorists also emphasize the importance of reflection, especially for teachers, to identify and evaluate their own bias (Black and Underwood, 1998; Clark and Blackburn, 2009; Uribe, 1994).
Clark and Blackburn (2009) advocated the necessity for teacher reflection: “For educators, knowing one’s biases and working against them is critical for teaching LGBT themed texts” (p. 31). Literature suggests that teachers who reflect on their own biases are able to aid students in their own reflective processes to identify their values and clarify how they relate to the world around them by examining them in context with a critical eye (Adams, Bell, and Griffin, 2007).

**Reflection in action.** Studies that use reflection as a critical tool, document teachers and researchers learning about themselves and their students in a variety of ways. While Nagle’s (1999) students critically examined gender roles, work ethic, education, and religion, she found through her critical reflection on teaching that her perceptions about education were elitist; she valued education as more important than physical labor, which was in direct contrast to her working class students. Thus, her reflection revealed her middle-class bias. Nagle (1999) contemplated:

> This awareness has led me to a new respect for my students’ world view and a realization that my classroom needs to be a place where school literacy enhances the life experiences of all students, not only those who share my middle class biases. (p. 165)

Nagle’s study portrayed how her stance as a teacher who used a critical reflection improved her own teaching and could serve as a model for other teachers to use.

Cook and Amatucci (2006) studied a first year ELA teacher, Kristi, over a five-year period to understand how she implemented multicultural education and the impact of aligning with a multicultural pedagogy had on her learning. Kristi reflected on her new approach to teaching, and her reflections revealed how she exceeded her initial
expectations, and “what began for Kristi as a commitment to introduce her students to the world through literature became a journey to learning about herself, her students, and how to reach them where they live” (Cook and Amatucci, 2006, p. 241). Kristi used reflection to document her growth and learning.

**Reflection in action in an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula.** Written reflections in journals is one way that teachers can encourage students to examine their biases, conflicts, and growth regarding LGBTQQ topics. Teacher researcher Young (2009) wrote about using journals to provide her students with an important place “to begin to grapple with, question, and reflect on their beliefs” (p. 110), as she engaged them in a critical inquiry into homophobia, a topic that the students chose. As a class, they discussed language and heterosexual privilege, read and watched LGBTQQ texts, and took action by creating educational outreaches within their school to raise awareness. In their journals, they captured examples of homophobic language they heard in school, reflected on their heterosexual privilege, recorded questions and generative topics for further discussion and posed solutions for problems. Young shared one of the valuable lessons she learned: “To end heterosexism as we develop critical literacy, it is important to problematize and challenge heterosexual privilege, homophobic language, and silent collusion” (Young, 2009, p. 114). Student reflection in journals provided the space for problematizing these issues of homophobia and heterosexual privilege.

**Conclusion to the Review of Literature**

The design of this study is situated in the bodies of theory and research of critical education theories and studies of critical, democratic, social justice, culturally responsive, and multicultural education. These descriptions of related theory and research, organized in this chapter around the key concepts guiding my oppression lens, offer different ways
to view the learning context from a stance that demands that educators look beyond the accepted canons of text, teaching practices and topics, and student assignments and engagement. Such a stance supports the development of strategies for creating and implementing an LGBTQQ inclusive curriculum and reflect the design of this study. A significant pattern in the literature that explores LGBTQQ inclusive curriculum is that the heteronormative environment of schools places gender nonconforming and LGBTQQ students at a disadvantage because they are excluded from the curricula in school. This study, grounded in theoretical and research literature, posits that teaching for social justice must offer methods for interrupting the heteronormative status quo and changing the school environment to become accepting of sexual diversity. The oppression lens I have developed advocates the use of praxis that draws on a critical stance, curriculum, and specific instructional tools to challenge the oppression cycle and encourage agency for all students. Although challenges certainly exist, social justice researchers insist that LGBTQQ topics and texts must be incorporated in the classroom to combat homophobia and challenge the privilege of heteronormativity, thereby making schools more equitable places for LGBTQQ students. Informed by the bodies of work described in this chapter, this study attempted to take on those challenges.
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This dissertation study builds on a pilot study that was conducted while I taught a semester-long high school Public Speaking class during the fall, 2012, semester. I developed a syllabus for the class focusing on four major concepts within a social justice stance: gender, race, class, and sexuality (used in both the pilot study and dissertation study). While the dissertation study focused on concepts of gender and sexuality, in the pilot study, I focused only on the concept of gender. In both the pilot and the dissertation studies, I used an oppression lens focusing on agency, understanding the oppression cycle, and praxis (see description in Chapters I and II) to guide my development of critical literacy practices and to undergird my facilitation of student discussions and selection of specific texts to support those discussions (Appendix A). The oppression lens also guided the methodology, development and execution of the pilot study as well as the dissertation study. The critical approach I used fuses critical components of classroom instruction to the use of an oppression lens that seeks to expose the source of social injustices within a cycle of power, privilege, and oppression. Guided by the tenets of action and critical action research, I conducted ongoing analysis of data, which led to insights that prompted me to alter aspects of the syllabus from the original proposal (Mills, 2011). Thus, as I gathered data, my plans changed based on student responses and needs. The first section of this methodology chapter provides an outline of the pilot study and how it informed the methodological stance and the design of the dissertation study.
The description of the pilot study is followed by an in-depth look at the methodology that guided the dissertation research.

**Pilot Study: Lived Experiences within Contested Spaces**

During the fall, 2012, semester, I conducted a pilot study over a six-week period. The purpose of the study was to explore how reading texts about gender, in conjunction with critical discussions, impacted the students’ beliefs about gender stereotypes and non-gender conforming individuals. In addition, this study investigated ways that critical literacy practices, used in conjunction with a social justice curriculum in a high school Public Speaking class, might inform student attitudes, beliefs, and actions about gender. The pilot study focused on the following research question: How does the inclusion of texts and discussions surrounding gender roles impact students’ beliefs?

**Context, Participants, Method**

I conducted the pilot study at Belvedere High School (all names of people and places are pseudonyms), a public high school in the rural southeastern United States, the same school where I later conducted the dissertation research. Enrollment statistics from the 2012 Annual School Report Card indicate there were 1,905 students in grades 9-12. I collected data in three of my Public Speaking classes. The numbers of students in each class varied between 21 and 28. In addition, student grade levels within each class ranged from 9 – 12, and their academic abilities ranged from honors to at risk.

To engage in our inquiry into gender, students read or viewed and discussed the following texts: the documentary *Pink Saris* (Longinotto, 2010), the article, “Lucky Boy” (Roberts, 2012), and the picture book *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman, 1991). Teaching strategies I used during this study included the implementation of Socratic Seminar, “a
collaborative intellectual dialogue facilitated with open-ended questions about a text” (Roberts and Billings, 2012, p. 4), small group discussions, and journaling. Engagement varied by student and task from very engaged to uninterested.

Action research was the methodological stance I took during the pilot study (Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh, 1993; Herr and Anderson, 2005; McNiff, 2009; Mills, 2011). This meant that I followed the general cycle of action research, which included planning a change, acting and observing the process and consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, and replanning (Kemmis, 2005). I planned instruction (social justice curriculum), recorded in-class observations, collected student responses, and conducted focus group interviews to determine the impact of the instruction on students’ existing beliefs. I analyzed the data using thematic pattern analysis, and created an action plan for the dissertation study.

Findings

Findings from the pilot study were focused on three areas: the process of the work, change, and instruction. In terms of process, I found that students needed time and opportunity to move between their lived experiences and their interactions with the curriculum materials to develop deeper understanding, to connect personally, and to build a foundation for reflection and critical discussions. Regarding change, I found that students’ intentional reflections led to changes in their thinking, which in itself showed many students moving toward an alteration in their beliefs about gender. In fact, Freire (1970) wrote that critical reflection, such as the reflection in which my students engaged, is a form of action. Here is an example of one student’s response that illustrated a change in thinking:
I guess I’m finding it [gender] more open to, one, talk about and, two, like, I’m more open minded about it now. I don’t see a person who is dressed like wow… I’ll be like, “Hey,” and not get into a deep discussion like with my friends, but that’s just because I don’t know them as much, but I notice myself giving them more chances. Like, still not as much as some people, but progressing.

Finally, students explicitly identified the Socratic Seminar technique as a positive instructional tool for changing their perceptions.

**Informing the Dissertation Proposal**

My initial analysis of the data from the gender unit and informal data collection from the other units led me to make several instructional changes as I planned my dissertation study. Because the pilot study demonstrated that students needed multiple occasions to engage with the text and time to discuss topics with multiple people, I designed the instructional timeline for the dissertation study to allow for longer engagement and more opportunities for discussion. While I recognize that teachers often feel rushed to get through the required curricula, and they do not often provide enough opportunities for students to “linger in the text” (Lewison, Leland, and Harste, 2008), my pilot study findings were clear: students needed time to read, reflect, think, and discuss. Fortunately, in the dissertation study, I was able to accommodate that need in the Public Speaking class, perhaps more than in other courses, because Public Speaking was an elective class; therefore, my curriculum was exempt from standards and standardized tests required by many English classes, allowing flexibility in planning and execution of plans to meet student needs. Therefore, as I planned my dissertation study, time to explore the topics and texts was a priority.
Also because of the pilot study experience, I realized that I needed to enhance the critical nature of students’ discussions and reflections. I found that many students settled on surface level conversations about the text instead of investigating the nature of oppression that led to social injustices. Therefore, in the dissertation study, I explicitly and intentionally introduced the notion of critical literacy skills to my students through carefully selected readings and by creating a list of questions that I could use to prompt critical discussion. In addition, I gave students critical questions that guided and increased the critical potential of their discussions for each text, small group discussion, and Socratic Seminar.

**Dissertation Study**

The purpose of the dissertation study was to investigate the impact of a social justice curriculum on students’ beliefs focusing predominantly on issues of gender and sexuality, in particular, LGBTQQ issues. I am committed to assisting students in understanding the naturalized and normalized beliefs that permeate their lives regarding gender, sexuality and confronting those beliefs through critical conversations and the positive and negative ramifications of their beliefs in the lives of others. The following research questions guided the study:

- What happens when a critical literacy/social justice approach to curriculum and teaching is used in a grades 9-12 Public Speaking class to support students’ examination of attitudes, beliefs, and actions regarding the discrimination against and oppression of LGBTQQ people and related issues?
How does the inclusion of specific texts, discussions, and assignments impact students’ beliefs about LGBTQQ issues?

How does the inclusion of texts, discussions, and assignments impact students’ beliefs about gender roles?

How does the inclusion of texts, discussions, and assignments about gender roles impact their beliefs about LGBTQQ issues?

How does the inclusion of specific instructional strategies and texts impact students’ beliefs about LGBTQQ people as agents versus victims?

Qualitative research, specifically critical action research, informed by grounded theory analysis, were the methodological stances used to investigate these research questions.

**Methodological Stance**

Qualitative methodologies anchor this dissertation study. Within the umbrella of qualitative research, I used critical action research as my methodological approach.

**Qualitative research.** Marshall and Rossman (2011) define qualitative research as “a broad approach to the study of social phenomena” (p. 3). As a teacher, I engaged in the multifaceted social experience of education, making qualitative research a natural fit for my dissertation study. According to Rossman and Rallis (2003), qualitative research follows five general characteristics: It “(a) takes place in the natural world; (b) uses multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic; (c) focuses on context; (d) is emergent rather than tightly prefigured; and (e) is fundamentally interpretive” (p. 8). My dissertation study took place in a natural setting (the classroom), using teaching and research methods that were parallel with the goals of my classroom. In addition, the study evolved from ongoing data collection and analysis, which was understood in the
context of my class, the school, and the location of the school. Although qualitative methodology informed the study from its conception, action research focused the study. Action research enabled me to examine my own practice within my own classroom.

**Action research.** In designing this study, I drew heavily from Mills’ (2011) definition, which describes action research as:

Any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment to gather information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn. This information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment (and on educational practices in general), and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved. Action research is done *by* teachers *for* themselves; it is not imposed on them by someone else. (p. 5)

Similar to basic tenets of qualitative work, action research focuses on reflection and reflexivity, which “is crucial because action researchers must interrogate received notions of improvement or solutions in terms of who ultimately benefits from the actions undertaken” (Herr and Anderson, 2005, p. 4). Action research is particularly useful for teachers who wish to examine their own practices using a systematic approach to improving their practice and providing insights for other teachers. Action research is conducted because of teachers’ interest in some aspect of their own teaching environments; this interest motivates their research (Herr and Anderson, 2005; McNiff and Whitehead, 2005; Mills, 2011).
While many practitioners are reflective about their practice, action research differs in that it also “insists on teachers justifying their claims to knowledge by the production of authenticated and validated evidence, and then making their claims public in order to subject them to critical evaluation” (McNiff and Whitehead, 2005, p. 2). Action research can be incorporated into the daily teaching practices of teachers to challenge common sense theories and informal evaluations of school environments and student-teacher interactions, which “increases the likelihood that a given curriculum, instructional strategy, or use of technology will positively affect student outcomes” (Mills, 2009, p. 11). Kemmis (2005) offers a general cycle of action research that I have adopted as foundational to the design of my own action research:

- Planning a change
- Acting and observing the process and consequences of the change
- Reflecting on these processes and consequences
- Replanning
- Acting and observing again
- Reflecting again, and so on

It is important to note that these are not discrete elements. Kemmis (2005) explained that:

The stages overlap, and initial plans quickly become obsolete in the light of learning from experience. In reality, the process is likely to be more fluid, open, and responsive. The criterion of success is not whether participants have followed the steps faithfully but rather whether they have a strong and authentic sense of development and evolution in their practices, their understandings of their practices, and the situations in which they practice. (p. 563)
In this study, I used the process of action research - collecting data, monitoring the response, and altering instruction when necessary - to foster student achievement and learning, focusing in particular on students’ recognition of homophobia and heterosexism and how to alter behaviors that promote beliefs and actions privileging heterosexuality and gender conforming individuals. The intent of my study was to initiate a change in attitude toward LGBTQ students and topics, and action research offered a perfect methodological match to learn with and from students to build a theory of change. Dick (2007) described the goals of action research:

Above all, action research is action oriented, intended to achieve change. The change occurs as understanding develops, not as a separate and later application of the understanding. Action research is responsive to the situation. The understanding and change are initially local, though the understanding can be extended through the multiple studies. Accordingly, action research is emergent. At the beginning of the study, not enough is known either to develop good theory or to design the research methods in detail. Action research builds its theory and fine tunes its methods and develops its plans of action gradually as it proceeds. (p. 400)

Action often occurs after intense reflection on a topic or information, especially in an action research classroom. Mills (2011) defines teacher researchers as being “committed to taking action and effecting positive educational change (author’s emphasis) in their own classrooms and schools based on their findings” (p. 3). One way that I took action was through critical reflection of my teaching practices and student interactions. I collected data through my day-to-day teaching practices to improve my practice, and,
through my reflection on the data, I worked to revise and deepen the quality of the education my students received. I also took action through this study by incorporating LGBTQ texts and critical literacy skills in my classroom and promoting the voices of marginalized people that school traditionally silences in the curriculum. Systematically studying the effect of my pedagogical choices on students’ attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions informed my understanding of the impact on student learning and on my practices.

**Critical action research.** This study also utilizes critical action research methodology, “also known as emancipatory action research because of its goal of liberation through knowledge gathering” (Mills, 2011, p. 6). Kemmis (2005) described critical action research as:

A commitment to bring together broad social analysis—the self-reflective collective self-study of practice, the way in which language is used, organization and power in a local situation, and action to improve things. Critical action research is strongly represented in the literatures of educational action research, and there it emerges from dissatisfactions with classroom action research that typically does not take a broad view of the role of the relationship between education and social change. It has a strong commitment to participation as well as to the social analyses in the critical social science tradition that reveal the disempowerment and injustice created in industrialized societies. (p. 560-561)

Action research conducted by educators is typically that which is conducted through the act of teaching, in my case, in the Public Speaking class I taught in the spring semester, 2013. The nature of the study lent itself to *critical* action research because it
focused on education for social change. I encouraged students to consider issues of privilege, disprivilege, power, and oppression and to question and consider ways to take action regarding social injustices they see in their worlds, particularly with regard to issues of homophobia, the marginalization of LGBTQ members of society, and anti-gay, discriminatory, and oppressive acts and behaviors.

Critical action research also allowed me to engage with students as I questioned social injustices alongside them and used our joint responses to alter my curriculum in a continuous cycle that challenged unjust social norms and improved my teaching practice so that it better reflected the tensions and concerns of my students.

The cyclical and ongoing nature of critical action research made it difficult to pinpoint the start and finish of this study (Mills, 2011), particularly in terms of my own learning as a teacher. I had been working to better address concepts of social justice in my class for several years. In fact, this study is in response to student feedback that suggested their feeling of helplessness in knowing how to respond to social justice issues.

**Participants**

All 21 students enrolled in my Public Speaking class during the spring, 2013, semester were given consent forms (Appendix B) to participate in this study; 17 students returned them with signatures of consent. One student who returned a consent form was in the Profoundly Mentally Disabled (PMD) class; therefore, I excluded her data from the analysis because she was enrolled in the class for social purposes and unable to complete most of the academic work. All students chose their own pseudonyms to protect their identity.
**Groups.** I collected data from all students who returned a consent form. Although separating participants into groups is not significant to data analysis, I determined that it would be more likely that I would acquire a variety of responses that answered my research questions if I purposefully created small discussion groups that contained a diversity of opinions about gender and sexuality. To create discussion groups, I placed students in groups of four students each that demonstrated, through observations and a survey (Appendix C), various perspectives on gender and homosexuality. The survey was a Likert scale assessing students’ positive or negative responses (acceptable, mostly acceptable, neutral, somewhat unacceptable, and unacceptable) to non-gender conforming individuals (expressing gender in ways that defies traditional feminine and masculine roles) and diversity of sexuality. Thus, groups of four students were constructed to ensure that, within each group, opinions about gender and sexuality fell on a continuum from “homophobic and opposed” to “non-gender conforming behaviors” to “ally and accepting” of varying outward expressions of gender. In addition to organizing groups based on their views of gender and sexuality, I attempted to include a variety of ages in each group. Table 3.1 shows the students’ pseudonyms, gender, grade level, and small group. I attached a number to each group to illustrate which participants worked together. I used the school’s database to attain the gender and grade for each student.

I collected artifactual data (see Table 3.2) from all participants. In addition, students in group one recorded their discussions to enable me to understand the process they engaged in while working with the material. I interviewed groups one and two after the gender unit due to time constraints, but I conducted focus group interviews with all of
the student groups after the sexuality unit and end of year speech. Table 3.2 summarizes
the data collection. Detailed descriptions of each data source are provided later in this
chapter.

Table 3.1.

**Participant Identifiers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lucifer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zumbob</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britt Britt</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candace</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralph</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernando</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ansley</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deeej</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ariel</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vadasz</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eduardo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participant profiles.** Although I collected artifactual data and conducted focus
group interviews with all of the students who returned consent forms, several students
became invaluable to the examination of individual students’ perspectives of the
curriculum during data analysis. The following sections feature individual participant
profiles that provide more detail on the participants prevalent in the findings in Chapter IV: Noah, Zumbob, Greg, Vadasz, Hannah, Deeej, Faith, Ariel, Lucifer, and Ansley.

Table 3.2

*Data Collection Table*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Techniques</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Artifactual data</td>
<td>Student responses to text</td>
<td>First day of every week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifactual data</td>
<td>“Big ideas” list</td>
<td>First day of every week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifactual data</td>
<td>Mid-term and end-of-term reflections</td>
<td>March 25 and May 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifactual data</td>
<td>Final project written speech</td>
<td>May 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group interviews</td>
<td>End of gender unit interviews</td>
<td>April 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group interviews</td>
<td>End of sexuality unit interviews</td>
<td>May 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group interviews</td>
<td>End of semester interviews</td>
<td>May 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcripts of audio</td>
<td>Small group discussions during gender and sexuality unit</td>
<td>March 25 April 8 April 15 April 16 April 30 May 6 May 7 May 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transcript</td>
<td>Socratic Seminar-Gender Sexuality</td>
<td>April 16 May 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher’s journal</td>
<td>Daily interactions with students throughout the semester</td>
<td>Once a week or any time I noted something January through May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memos</td>
<td>All data</td>
<td>After data collection and throughout analysis April through July</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Noah.* Noah was an 18-year-old, college bound, African-American female. Early in the semester, she identified herself as a lesbian. She came out as a lesbian to some of her classmates and to me in the first few weeks of the semester and openly talked about
her sexual orientation with us. The initial survey indicated that Noah held views supporting same sex marriage and accepted gender expression that defied traditional masculine and feminine identifiers. She also acknowledged her multifaceted identity: “My identity is different from what people might perceive because they don’t know me; they only know what they see on the outside” (Midterm Reflection). These qualities made her vital to this study.

_Zumbob._ Zumbob was an 18-year-old, college bound, White male. Zumbob identified as heterosexual and constantly employed effeminate male role-playing throughout the semester. On the survey I gave to place students in groups, Zumbob noted he was mostly accepting of individuals expressing their gender in different ways and gay marriage being legal. In contrast, he also noted that it was mostly acceptable to use phrases like “that’s gay” to joke around. His beliefs about identity were intriguing because he was vehemently opposed to individuals being transgender, but he stated, “As long as you act like yourself people will love you” (Midterm Reflection). His beliefs made his perspectives significant to the study.

_Greg._ Greg was a 15-year-old White male. Greg did not speak often during group discussions, but appeared to listen attentively, and when probed by me or other group members, openly shared his opinions and views. In the initial survey, Greg revealed that gay marriage and expressing gender in various ways was unacceptable. His intense feelings about homosexuality and transgender individuals were important to bring diversity to the discussion and to understand the impact of the curriculum on those beliefs.
Vadasz. Vadasz was a 16-year-old White female. Vadasz led group discussion, and based on my observations openly shared her opinions and views. She spoke nearly twice as much as the other members of the group (based on transcript data). Oftentimes she appeared to struggle to stay on task, but when she was on task, she guided her groups’ discussion and refocused her group members’ assigned tasks. The initial survey revealed that, like Zumbob, Vasdasz also believed that gay marriage and expression of gender in various ways was mostly acceptable. Understanding the impact of the curriculum on her compliant beliefs was important for the study.

Hannah. Hannah was a 15-year-old White female. Her verbal contributions in small group discussions were small, but her written work was complete and thoughtful. According to the survey, Hannah considered expressing gender in a variety of ways acceptable, but she identified her views on gay marriage as neutral. As part of her midterm reflection, she chose a picture from Glee (popular television show) with the cast wearing their “born this way” shirts, and she wrote, “This show works in my life because it teaches me not to judge others. It has shown me that sometimes I’m wrong, sometimes they’re wrong, but we all need to love each other” (Midterm Reflection). Her pliant beliefs regarding sexuality made her a key member of the study.

Deej. Deej was a 17-year-old White male who was a member of the school wrestling team and identified with being an athlete. Deej was talkative in his small group discussions, often leading and directing conversation (transcript data). Deej’s responses on his survey identified that he believed that gay marriage and a variety of gender expression were mostly acceptable. His strong identification with his White Male identity and his tentative beliefs made him a beneficial member of the study.
Faith. Faith was a 16-year-old White female, and like Hannah, was tentative in group discussions and often had to be encouraged by another student in the group to share her opinion. She appeared to be open about her feelings, based on the congruity between her written responses and transcript data. Faith was an interesting addition to the study because she identified as an ally through small and large group discussions, but her survey responses indicated that she viewed expressing gender in various ways as mostly unacceptable. Her strict adherence to gender regulation did not seem to adversely influence her ally position. For example, in an interview she shared: “Honestly I just feel that I guess like love is love, and I mean you can't really choose that and everybody deserves it. No matter-what.” And what seemed to be her dichotomous beliefs made her a significant addition to the study.

Ariel. Ariel was an 18-year-old White female who was very conscientious about her grades and completed every assignment. Based on my observations, she kept her group on task by redirecting them back to the article, asking probing questions, or making sure all group work was complete. Her persuasive speech topic on gay rights and her answers on the survey identified her as an ally, which was an important addition to the study.

Lucifer. Lucifer was a 16-year-old White male who communicated his opinions and views, during small group and whole group discussions, openly and honestly despite contentions from his classmates. Lucifer’s survey indicated that he mostly supported gay marriage, simultaneously believed that it was acceptable to use “that’s gay” and “fag” as a joke. He also took an adamant stance to protect individuals from persecution and bullying. For example, in his end of year reflection he wrote: “I am fully able to stand
up for people….If they kept being a bully I’d get in a fight”. The contradiction in Lucifer’s beliefs as well as his ally position made his insights valuable to this study.

Ansley. Ansely was a 15-year-old White female who was verbose about her opinions and thoughts throughout the semester. Her survey suggested she was inclined to employ an ally stance based on her support of gay marriage and expressing gender in various ways. In addition, she reflected upon the content of the class, specifically oppression, with a broad lens. For example, in her response to iO Tillet Wright’s video she wrote, “If all men are created equal why is there so much judgment, hate, bullying, and just horrible things happening to people.” Her responses and openness made her a notable participant in the study.

Obtaining Human Subjects Approval

I submitted the proposal (Appendix D) and the student consent form (Appendix B) for approval from the school district in which I gathered data in October, 2012, and initially was denied approval because I needed Internal Review Board (IRB) approval from the university I attend, a large state university in the southeastern United States. After my proposal defense in January, 2013, I submitted my proposal through IRB at the university and was granted approval on February 20, 2013 (Appendix E). I resubmitted the IRB proposal for the school district and was granted approval on March 4, 2013 (Appendix F).

Contexts

Belvedere High School. The primary context of this study was Belvedere High School, which is a public high school in the rural southeastern United States. Enrollment statistics from the 2012 Annual School Report Card proclaim there are 1,905 students in
grades 9-12. The school has an 84% graduation rate and 97% passing rate on the state exit examination (an examination that students take their sophomore year that every student must pass in order to graduate). The demographic make-up is 74% White, 19% African-American, 6% Hispanic, and 1% Other (School Report Card, 2012). Forty percent of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch (School District Website, 2012).

Public speaking class. Within Belvedere High School, data were collected in my Public Speaking class. Students do not have to have any pre-requisites to take the class, and it is a mixed age and ability level class. Public Speaking is an elective course; therefore, I created the curriculum, as well as selected the texts that I used to support the curriculum. For this study, I developed a two-part overlapping curriculum: genre study and social justice. In the genre study curriculum, students studied storytelling, informative speaking, persuasive speaking, special occasion speeches, and performance. In the social justice unit, we explored gender, class, race, and sexuality. Table 3.3 illustrates my plan for the Genre and Social Justice units during the 18-week semester.

Table 3.3.

Curricula Unit Overviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Unit: Genre Study Curriculum Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>Storytelling speeches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>Persuasive speeches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>Informative speeches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-15</td>
<td>Special Occasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-18</td>
<td>Final Project</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In both units, I used a variation of a workshop model drawing from Ray and Laminack (2001) and their identification of major components of writing workshop: “choices about content, time for writing, teaching, talking, periods of focused study, publication rituals, high expectations and safety, and structured management” (p. 15). The workshop method uses these components to focus on what teachers can do to help students’ progress in reading and writing.

Building on the workshop literature, Urbanski (2006) suggested a number of instructional strategies specifically for literature-based writing workshops in high schools to include:

- teacher modeling, which is when the teacher models a skill or process for students;
- student opportunity for freewriting, which is when students write anything and everything they can about a topic or prompt;
- journaling, which is when students write and reflect on a topic;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Unit: Social Justice Curriculum Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction to Social Justice and Civil Discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4</td>
<td>Race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-15</td>
<td>Sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-18</td>
<td>Final Project</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
teaching skills in context, which is when a teacher focuses on a skill like prewriting in the context of a unit that is being taught, like prewriting for a persuasive speech;

- conferencing, which is when students meet with the teacher to guide and expand on the goals that students set for themselves;

- writing and literature groups, which is when students collaborate with each other to improve their writing or to investigate a piece of writing.

I converted the strategies described by these experts for use in my public speaking class. The revised components were:

- modeling speeches to analyze craft, which is when I chose speeches delivered by experts to play for students, and we analyzed the delivery and content together;

- participation in drama and improvisation activities, which was intended to improve delivery of speeches;

- mini-lessons, which was to demonstrate writing, revising, and editing of speeches;

- teacher modeling of writing and speaking skills, which is when I demonstrated the task that I expected students to complete.

Table 3.4 illustrates the workshop schedule that guided the planning of each unit.

*Pedagogical Framework for Public Speaking Course.* I used an oppression lens (Figure 1.2) to develop the curriculum for this study with the goal of involving students in understanding the world through such a lens. The oppression lens emerged from my study of a range of literature that focuses on critical pedagogical practices that guide
Table 3.4.

*Public Speaking Workshop Schedule*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celebrations</td>
<td>Celebrations</td>
<td>Celebrations</td>
<td>Celebrations</td>
<td>Celebrations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read text of the week (tied to social justice topic)</td>
<td>Mini-lesson:</td>
<td>Mini-lesson</td>
<td>Mini-lesson</td>
<td>Impromptu speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Response</td>
<td>Speaking Model</td>
<td>Drama Activity</td>
<td>Speaking Model</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Group Discussion</td>
<td>Independent Time</td>
<td>Independent Time</td>
<td>Independent Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Group Share</td>
<td>Whole Group Share</td>
<td>Whole Group Share</td>
<td>Whole Group Share</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

educators in establishing a social justice classroom. The lens ultimately focused on three organizing concepts: agency, the oppression cycle, and praxis. With these concepts and the review of literature in mind, the practices that constituted the pedagogical framework for the public speaking course reflected the theoretical traditions of critical pedagogy and democratic education, culturally responsive education, social justice education, multicultural education, and LGBTQ inclusive curricula (Adams, Anne, and Griffin, 2007; Apple, 2000; Banks, 1997; Blackburn, 2012; Compton-Lilly, 2004; Freire, 1970; Gay, 2010; Griffin and Ouellett, 2007; Kinloch, 2010; Kumashiro, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lewison, Leland, and Harste, 2008; Lipkin, 2008; Luke and Freebody, 1997; Nieto and Bode, 2010; Shor, 1999). My stance, curriculum, and instructional strategies and routines, derived from the literature reviewed in Chapter II and viewed through my oppression lens. I used a variety of critical instructional strategies throughout all units of study as well as some routines that were specific to either the genre or social justice curricula. All units cumulatively built students’ discussion skills through small group and whole class discussions. There were some lessons I pre-planned so that I
could introduce skills on which we built throughout the semester. They included lessons on referring back to the text, what to do when conversation stalls, recognizing author’s craft, etc. Others emerged based on the class’s needs. For example, during the race unit, I observed students just reading their written responses to the text, instead of delving deeper into the text, so I created a mini-lesson to encourage students to question each other to further their discussion. The following sections review specific elements of practice, specifically instructional strategies, as I used them to facilitate the creation of my curricula and guide my pedagogical decisions.

Whole group instruction and discussions. Creating an environment where students feel safe and supported as they engage in learning and sharing their ideas and stories is essential because social justice topics and activities often cause students to feel vulnerable (Griffin and Ouellett, 2007). Griffin and Ouellett (2007) identified seven fundamental features to creating an atmosphere conducive to delving into social justice topics:

(a) identifying participation guidelines, (b) attending to personal comfort, (c) setting the tone, (d) evaluating the physical space, (e) ensuring access, (f) differentiating between safety and comfort, and (g) attending to group development in multicultural classes. (p. 95)

To facilitate learning in whole group instruction and discussion, and to ensure that students felt safe and supported, the students and I created a list of discourse rules and goals; for example, one of the goals was to encourage others to talk and not to interrupt when others are talking (for a complete list see Appendix G). These goals guided whole and small group discussions. We constantly reflected and altered them as necessary to
ensure a safe environment to explore social justice topics. Griffin and Ouellett (2007) also suggest, “Social justice education is enriched when the facilitator can comfortably share with participants her own experiences, feelings, and struggles with social justice topics” (p. 97). I often shared personal perspectives on the texts and topics that challenged students’ views and beliefs. For example, when we discussed the concept of raising children in gender-neutral environments, the students asked if I would let my son wear girl clothes. I shared that my perspective has changed, and that five years ago, I would have said, “No”, but now I would say, “Yes,” because I want to support his exploration of gender, so he is confident in whatever identity he chooses. I attempted to model my own personal growth through reading and reflection on how stereotypes and naturalized ideas of child rearing are altered.

In addition, I focused the large group talk on concepts tied to critical literacy and the social justice curriculum that I wanted to explore. For example, in whole group discussion we explored the following topics for each text we read: the role of prejudice and equality, privilege connections to power and oppression, and the connection between prejudice and larger systems of oppression. Some small group discussions explored each topic, but to make sure that everyone in the class had the opportunity to discuss a particular issue, I used large group time to make certain concepts explicit. In addition, I crafted a curriculum where certain texts lent themselves to particular critical literacy concepts (see Appendix H for a week-to-week list of texts, engagements, and models, as related to the curricular topics).

Small group discussions. Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) see dialogue as a generative process that can link students’ lived experience and knowledge to traditional
academic literacies. Social justice educators also use dialogue to communicate with students by expressing differences in beliefs; Griffin and Ouellett (2007) clarified:

Because the activities in a social justice education course are designed to raise contradictions and challenge participants to rethink their understanding of social power relationships, discussions can be intense as conflicting perspectives are expressed” (p. 98).

Using discourse rules and goals established as a whole class, small groups of students were responsible for sharing their responses to the text and holding each other accountable for participation during discussion. I gave each group a folder where the class discourse rules and goals were listed, and the group was asked to score themselves on a scale between one and five (Appendix G). I also asked students to complete a meeting log sheet (Appendix I), where they had to set a specific discourse goal and plan how to achieve that goal for the next meeting. Students were able to work through differing opinions and beliefs using dialogue to determine underlying causes for social problems and potential solutions. In my classroom, dialogue allowed me to learn and understand my students’ beliefs and offered a non-threatening way for students to explore their convictions and the ideas of others while simultaneously offering them opportunities to reposition their beliefs.

_Drama and reflection activities._ During all units, students engaged in drama activities, which required role-play and improvisation. For example, when we discussed storytelling, I asked the students to perform an improvisational skit using the alphabet for the first line of dialogue to improve spontaneity, creativity, and storytelling skills. When discussing persuasive speeches, I asked students to dramatize a skit with a partner that
required each person to convince the other person of their point of view, improving their persuasive speaking skills (See Appendix H for a list of how all drama activities connect to the topics of study). Students wrote a reflection after each drama activity, connecting the activity to their public speaking performance.

Weekly speeches. Every Friday students were required to perform an impromptu speech. I provided the topic as they arrived in class, and students had ten minutes to prepare a speech prior to performing it. I designed speech topics that either addressed specific skills that I felt the students needed to improve (for example, leads, propaganda techniques, or explaining a process) or a topic that increased their experience with the genre under study, e.g., informative, persuasive, etc. All students wrote a reflection on the class’s performance as a whole and what they noticed as strengths and challenges.

Speaking Models. Texts are ways of communicating, as well as establishing power and authority (Lankshear and Knobel, 1997; Luke and Freebody, 1997). Although some texts lend themselves readily to social justice, critical literacy, and education because of their content, when a reader takes a critical perspective, any text can be read critically (Rosenblatt L. M., 1938). In each unit, the texts I chose were speeches that I used to integrate content from the genre and social justice curriculum and model various presentation skills. All units in the genre curriculum included a number of speaking models (videos of actual speeches and their transcripts when available) that students viewed and responded to in their notebooks (see Appendix H). For example, during the race unit, we studied persuasive speeches simultaneously, and I used Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech as a model. Student responses to these models also
infiltrated our discussions throughout the other units; therefore, when these instances occurred, I recorded them in my researcher’s journal.

Response to social justice texts. Thinking about ways to use texts is a demanding task for teachers because of all the options available. However, when choosing the texts to which students would respond in the social justice curriculum, I relied on Lankshear and Knobel’s (1997) who suggested starting with “an everyday text—a media story—that is rich in thematic possibilities for enhancing social imagination and understanding citizenship—as it has been constructed discursively, and how it might need reconstructing” (p. 111), as well as by extending into electronic media. Luke and Freebody (1997) agreed, “The new cultural forms do have a massive and significant impact on our and our children’s identity development, on our world views, politics, social relations, and actions” (p. 25). When I considered texts for my classroom, I included print and digital resources, e.g., informational videos, speeches, articles, documentaries, picture books, and graphics. I did not limit the text choice to a canonical text and aimed to include a variety of formats. I was interested in the depth of discussion and generation of ideas, and the kinds of conversations we might have based on the texts I chose. Students responded weekly to a text that we read as a whole class; for example, we studied texts such as “The Transgender Athlete” (Ridley, 2012), “The Gender Pay Gap” (Knowledge@Wharton, 2012) and “Lucky Boy” (Roberts, 2012). The text Response Sheet can be found in Appendix T, but in general, it asked students not to summarize the text, but to write their initial thoughts about the content or how the author created the text. Then students discussed the text in small groups using the discourse rules and debriefed their findings to the whole class. I also posted discussion questions on the
Researchers describe the importance of the inclusion of LBGTTQQ texts in order to combat homophobia and negative views of LBGTTQQ people (Curwood, Schlesman, and Horning, 2009). However, choosing texts to which students could respond in the sexuality unit was challenging because of the limited amount of research available about using and identifying LBGTTQQ texts in the classroom. Once the important task of choosing the texts was completed, I engaged students in literature studies of the texts, knowing that scholars and researchers (e.g., Banks, 2009; Ressler and Chase, 2009; Swartz, 2003; Walling, 2003) affirm the significance of literature study to discussions of LBGTTQQ topics. Also important to this study, I hoped that students would learn how to become allies by reading LBGTTQQ themed literature (Blackburn, 2012), and with that goal in mind, I specifically chose texts that portrayed allies and rejected negative depictions of homosexuality (Appendix A). I attempted to include literature that depicted LBGTTQQ individuals positioned toward the agentive side of the victim agent dichotomy.

*Socratic Seminar.* Critical theorists Luke and Freebody (1997) advocate for an approach in which questioning is a fundamental aspect of inquiry used to encourage students to investigate texts that appear neutral and often remain unquestioned. Lindfors (1999), though, expanded the idea of an inquiry stance as solely relying on questions and defines inquiry as “the ultimate acts of going beyond: going beyond present understanding (intellectual); going beyond self to engage (the help of) another (social); but ever going beyond as self (personal)” (p. 14). This can take the form of questions,
wondering, reflection, playing with possibilities, seeking knowledge, and approaching situations with a tentative stance and the realization that knowledge is unstable and changing. As Lindfors (1999) suggests, this means that inquiry does not take place in a bubble; by nature it is a social practice in which people seek to extend personal knowledge through dialogue. One way students developed inquiry practices in my classroom was through Socratic Seminars conducted at the end of each social justice unit.

A Socratic Seminar is “a constructivist strategy in which participants engage in a conversation to collectively seek a deeper understanding of complex ideas” (Copeland, 2005, p. 6). The Socratic Seminar synthesized the ideas from each unit and allowed students to use various inquiry skills like hypothesizing, probing, and playing with possibilities that they might not have experienced in their small group discussions. I provided students with a pre-writing for each Socratic Seminar to activate their knowledge and assist their synthesis of the topics discussed during each social justice unit. Each pre-writing (Appendix P and T) consisted of several questions, created from student responses and critical aspects of the topic under investigation. Students brought their responses to the Socratic Seminar. I began the Socratic Seminar by asking for volunteers to share answers to the questions from the pre-writing or if somebody wanted to pose an alternative question. From there, the students maintained control of the discussion, relying on the pre-writing questions when discussion began to diminish or get off topic. I only inserted myself in the discussion when off topic conversation occurred or when the discussion lent itself to further probing. I conducted one Socratic Seminar at the end of each unit of the social justice curriculum, and each one lasted approximately
45 minutes, unless students were engaged in thoughtful and productive discussion then I extended the allotted time. The Socratic Seminar culminated in a written reflection.

**Final project.** Students were assigned a final project (Appendix K) in which they were required to combine the two curricula (social justice and genre study) and use knowledge and skills gained from both curricula to complete the project. The final project required students to choose a social justice topic based on observations that they made in their worlds. For example, the model observation I used was noticing that there were few minority students in Advanced Placement classes in our school. I turned the observation into a research question: “Why are there not more minority students in Advanced Placement classes in my school?” After students chose a research question, they investigated whether or not the phenomenon was consistent in other schools. Students researched the topic and presented their findings to our class in an informative speech. Then students transformed their findings into an aesthetically pleasing format for a wider audience and presented it in the school auditorium with multiple classes in attendance on May 24, 2013. Students decided on a presentation format by matching the purpose of their presentation with their strengths as writers and public speakers, choosing a format they felt best illustrated their findings and would engage their audience. They chose a variety of formats for their final presentations; videos, dramatizations, and poems.

**Gender and sexuality units.** All of the instructional strategies described above intersect with the social justice and genre curriculums supporting an exploration of power, privilege, and bias in texts from multiple perspectives. The following sections review the gender and sexuality unit as it occurred, but the reality of teaching and
learning is that it is non-linear, contrary to how it appears. For example, field trips, student absences, my absences, and interest or lack thereof in certain activities caused me to alter the length of an activity, which affected the next day’s or week’s agenda.

**Gender unit.** The purpose of the gender unit was to increase students’ understanding of gender, challenge normalized beliefs, develop connections and distinctions between gender and sexuality, and extend and expand their knowledge and the implications of gender regarding power, privilege, and bias. Table 3.5 gives a brief overview of the gender unit.

**March 25.** The gender unit began with a “Gender Terms Activity” (instructions are in Appendix L) where we discussed the definitions and connotations of male, female, masculine, feminine, gender, and biological sex. Then I read aloud an article called “Lucky Boy” (Roberts, 2012), which describes a set of parents who attempt to raise their son in a gender-neutral environment. Students wrote an initial response to the article, discussed their responses in small groups, and then a spokesperson from each small group shared one big idea/question with the whole group. During small group conversations, I put possible discussion questions on the overhead (Appendix M) to guide them if they came to a stopping point before discussion time was over. For homework, students had a discussion with someone outside of class about the article and turned in the written response the following Monday.

**April 8.** The second week in the unit, started with a small group activity where students discussed how they learned social gender roles and then created a product that visually showed how gender was learned (instructions in Appendix N). A spokesperson
Table 3.5

Overview of Gender Unit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day(s)</th>
<th>Instructional Strategies</th>
<th>Student Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 25</td>
<td>Gender terms activity&lt;br&gt;“Lucky Boy”—read aloud&lt;br&gt;Discussion questions&lt;br&gt;Homework</td>
<td>Written responses&lt;br&gt;Written response/small group discussion&lt;br&gt;Spokesperson shared big ideas&lt;br&gt;Discuss article with outside person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 8</td>
<td>Learning gender roles&lt;br&gt;“The Vicious Cycle of the Gender Pay Gap” and “What Women Want Now”—read aloud&lt;br&gt;Reflection on discourse goals&lt;br&gt;Homework</td>
<td>Small group discussion/visual representation&lt;br&gt;Written responses/small group discussions&lt;br&gt;Written response to discourse goals&lt;br&gt;Find an article, summarize, connect to class discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 15-16</td>
<td>Gender conforming privileges&lt;br&gt;Watch Human Sexuality Video&lt;br&gt;“Transgender Athlete”—read aloud&lt;br&gt;Homework&lt;br&gt;Socratic Seminar</td>
<td>Written responses&lt;br&gt;Whole class discussion&lt;br&gt;Written responses/small group discussions&lt;br&gt;Record words related to gender&lt;br&gt;Prewriting and reflection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

from each group shared their visual representations with the class. I then read aloud “The Vicious Cycle of the Gender Pay Gap” (Knowledge@Wharton, 2012) and “What Women Want Now” (Gibbs, 2009), and students wrote a response which they discussed in small groups. For homework, students had to find an article connected to the topic of gender,
write a summary, and explain how it connected to our class discussion and text and turn it in the following Monday.

April 15. An activity called Privilege of Being Gender Conforming (Appendix O) initiated the third week in the unit. We made a class list of privileges we experienced if we conform to our socially prescribed gender roles and followed with a written reflection. Then I showed the class a YouTube video called Human Sexuality is Complicated…. (Green, 2012) where host, Hank Green, explained the difference between gender, sexual orientation, and biological sex. Afterward, I read aloud the article “The Transgender Athlete” (Ridley, 2012), and students wrote an initial response and discussed the article in their small groups. A spokesperson shared one of the big ideas/questions that their group discussed about the text, and I recorded them on the board. Some of their big ideas revolved around names/pronouns: individual changes from male to female and NCAA rule changes. For homework, students had to record words that they heard around them that connected to gender, where they heard the word, and the intent behind the word and turn it in the following Monday.

April 16. After the follow up discussion of the article, “The Transgender Athlete” (Ridley, 2012), I gave students a pre-writing assignment to prepare them for a Socratic Seminar (Appendix P). I asked them to respond to some of the critical topics we had explored, such as the societal impact of reducing stereotypes, the difference between equality and sameness regarding treatment of men and women, and how to resist gender oppression. I crafted the Socratic Seminar questions using the students’ initial responses and feedback from their discussions, as well as information from my readings on power, privilege, oppression, and critical education. Some of the questions included:
Should equality for women mean making things the same as men?
In what ways do institutions oppress women and men?
In what ways can EVERYONE stand up against gender oppression?

This allowed them to enter the Socratic Seminar about gender with their thinking about critical issues in media res. This was an opportunity for students to synthesize their ideas across all of the texts discussed in class, as well as their personal experiences with gender. I audio recorded the discussion. Students then wrote a reflection on their experience and learning in the unit, and I conducted my first round of small group interviews.

**Sexuality unit.** The sexuality unit aimed to build on the concepts of power, privilege, oppression and bias discussed in the previous units, while focusing on sexuality. In addition, we explored how individuals, groups, and nations decide who is included in who is cared for and protected, the consequences for individuals and groups considered outside of a community’s protection, and what encourages and inspires people to stand up to injustice. Table 3.6 gives an overview of the sexuality unit.

April 29. Day one of the sexuality built on the last activity in the gender unit, which invited students to determine privileges individuals receive if they conform to society’s gender expectations (Appendix O). I guided the first lesson in the sexuality unit with a PowerPoint presentation titled “Institutional Heterosexism” (Appendix Q), which began with a sexuality vocabulary quiz. Students answered the quiz questions, and graded and scored their own papers. Then I asked students to write down two ways that they experienced privilege in society if they were heterosexual. I then introduced and defined the concept of heteronormativity, we discussed institutional heterosexism,
Table 3.6

*Overview of Sexuality Unit*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Instructional Strategies</th>
<th>Student Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 29</td>
<td>Sexuality vocabulary quiz</td>
<td>Multiple choice answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group brainstorm institutional heterosexualism</td>
<td>Written responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexuality history timeline</td>
<td>Written response/small group discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Review/set discourse goal</td>
<td>Spokesperson shared big ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>Written response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discuss article with outside person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 6</td>
<td>The impact of language: freewrite, discussion, role play,</td>
<td>Small group discussion/written responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reflection</td>
<td>Written response to discourse goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Think B4 You Speak TV Ads</em></td>
<td>Find an article, summarize, connect to class discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Homework</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 13</td>
<td>“From Bystander to Ally: freewrite, discussion, read aloud</td>
<td>Written responses/small group discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50 Shades of Gay—speech</td>
<td>Written responses/small group discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>Record words related to gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 14</td>
<td>Prewriting</td>
<td>Written response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socratic Seminar</td>
<td>Whole class discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>Written response</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and each group brainstormed ways that institutional heterosexism existed in the following areas: family, legal systems, workplace, education, healthcare, and media and entered their responses on one of the charts. Each group had two minutes at each chart to record
their answers. Their answers included: gay couples do not have marital benefits; you can see your significant other in intensive care if they are hurt, some families do not accept their children if they are homosexual, and heterosexual celebrities do not have to “come out”. Individually students reflected in their social justice notebook on the impact of institutions on heterosexual norms and the oppression of LGBTQQ individuals.

Afterwards, each group was given a History Timeline (Adams, Anne, Griffin, 2007) of sexuality, and students talked about the text and recorded their initial responses. The following day we spent the first 10 minutes in small groups discussing the timeline, and I gave them critical questions to guide their discussion. For example, I asked them how the timeline addressed different points of view, how the text addressed justice in the world, and who had power and who was marginalized in the text. I also asked the students to review their group discourse goals before their discussion, evaluate themselves afterwards, and set a new goal for the next week (Appendix G). For homework, students were expected to have a discussion with someone outside of class about the timeline and turn in the written response the following Monday.

May 6. I began the lesson with a PowerPoint titled “Exploring the Impact of Language” (Appendix R) adapted from GLSEN: Think B4 You Speak Educators Guide (2008). Students engaged in a free write about a time that they experienced someone using language that hurt them, how it made them feel, and how they handled the situation; followed by a discussion about the impact of hurtful language. They followed their discussion by role-playing different scenarios of people using “that’s gay” and completed a chart about how to break bad language habits. They completed this experience with a written reflection. Students then viewed three Think B4 You Speak TV
advertisements, wrote responses, and discussed them in small groups. Some of their big ideas centered on language, as students explained that they did not think gay people should be offended by the word *gay*. Other big ideas focused on the advertisements themselves, how celebrities made them more appealing, and that the commercials targeted a younger age group. For homework, students were expected to find an article that connected to the topics discussed in class, summarize the article, write a connection to the class text or discussion, and turn it in the following Monday.

*May 13.* The last lesson in the sexuality unit began with another PowerPoint presentation titled “From Bystander to Ally” (Appendix S) adapted from the GLSEN Jump Start Guide: Examining Power, Privilege, and Oppression, (2013). Students began by free writing about a time where they were uncomfortable with a situation in which someone else used derogatory language, but no one put a stop to it. In small groups, students discussed the discrepancy between what people know is the right thing to do and what people actually do. I read aloud “10 Ways to be an Ally” (GLAAD, 2013) and then we viewed iO Tillet Wright’s speech *50 Shades of Gay* (2013) and wrote a response followed by a small group discussion. For homework, students were expected to record words that they heard around them that connected to sexuality, where they heard the word, and the intent behind the word.

*May 14.* Building on the student’s initial responses and feedback from their discussions, I created questions that engaged them in a Socratic Seminar about sexuality (Appendix T). Some of the questions included were:
• How does the information (from the unit) confirm or contradict what you have learned about the relationship among biological/birth sex, gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation?

• How do the historical foundations help to explain contemporary institutional mechanisms of heterosexism in law, medicine, religion, and education?

• And how can individuals stand up against heterosexual oppression?

This was an opportunity for students to synthesize their ideas across all of the texts discussed in class, as well as their personal experiences with sexuality. Students wrote a reflection on their experience and learning in the unit, and I conducted my second round of focus group interviews. The gender and sexuality unit were the principal time periods during which I collected data.

Data Collection Methods

Collecting multiple forms of data is necessary for a qualitative study (Glesne, 2011) in order to triangulate data. In turn, this lends credibility to the data interpretations (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Therefore, I collected (a) artifactual data, e.g., written student responses during the gender and sexuality for the dissertation; (b) conducted and transcribed focus group interviews after the completion of the gender unit, sexuality unit, and at the end of the semester; (c) recorded and transcribed small group discussions of and whole class discussions throughout the gender and sexuality units; and (d) kept a researcher’s journal to record my reflections along with observations of students.

Artifactual data. During the course of the semester students read and wrote responses to multiple texts. They created and synthesized their understandings of the
topics of gender and sexuality in multiple ways. Listed below are types of student responses and the manner in which I collected the artifactual data (See Table 3.2).

**Student responses to texts.** As students wrote responses to each class text, I invited them to write any questions they had after engaging with the text, any connections they made (to their own experiences, to other texts, to broader world issues), and anything they noticed about the craft of the text. Students wrote this in a bulleted list or in paragraph form, but I expected them to produce at least five ideas for discussion. Students recorded their responses on a text response sheet (Appendix J). When students completed the homework portion, they e-mailed it to me or turned in a hard copy. These responses constituted one source of weekly data and were a particularly valuable source of information because it allowed students to voice thoughts that they might not have been comfortable discussing in class.

**“Big ideas” lists.** In addition to individual responses, students met in small groups to discuss their initial reactions, questions, and the ideas/main points of the text. One student in each group was the spokesperson and verbally shared one or two “big ideas” that originated from their group discussion, and I recorded them on the board and later typed the list. These lists provided further data to document student responses to the social justice curriculum.

**Mid-term and end-of-term reflections.** Other key pieces of data were the students’ mid-term and end of term reflections through which they synthesized some of the big ideas with which they had been grappling during the semester. Guidelines for these reflections asked students to consider their learning pertaining to the topic under study (gender or sexuality), reflect on their growth and learning from small group and
whole group discussions, and respond to the learning from the texts and assignments in class (midterm reflection Appendix T, final reflection Appendix V).

**Final project: Written speeches.** The final pieces of artifactual data for this study were the written speeches students prepared for their final project. For this project, they recorded observations of social inequalities in their worlds. They conducted research and an investigation based on their observations and presented their findings in multiple formats to address multiple audiences. This was another opportunity for students to synthesize their ideas and skills learned throughout the semester.

**Focus group interviews.** Glesne (2011) defined focus group interviewing as “facilitating a discussion on a particular topic among a selected set of people” (p. 130). Roulston (2010) maintained that “a key assumption of this kind of work is that the very nature of focus groups—with participants out-numbering the moderator—provides opportunities to deliberately upset the asymmetrical relationships usually assumed by researchers with participants of studies” (p. 39). This method of data collection was useful in my study because of the unequal nature of my relationship with students as the researcher and their teacher. Focus groups offered a way for the power balance to shift and increase students’ comfort level with providing information.

I conducted three rounds of focus group interviews in which the students in my two small groups participated. I interviewed group one first and then group two. So that there would be fewer interruptions, I conducted the first round of interviews after the gender unit and interviewed students in their small groups in the hallway outside of my classroom while my literacy coach substituted in my classroom. We sat on the floor with my iPad in the middle of our circle, and I explained that I was asking questions about the
gender unit to help me understand my teaching practices better and that I was recording it for data for my dissertation. I asked questions (Appendix W) and only added prompting and additional questions to add detail to their responses or to urge a particular student in the group to respond.

Second and third rounds of focus group interviews followed the same process. I conducted the second round of focus groups at the end of the sexuality unit. Fortunately, I had more time during the second and third rounds of focus group interviews, and I was able to interview every student who turned in a signed consent form. I interviewed each group in the hallway outside my class while a fellow English teacher worked with the students in class on their speeches.

The third round of focus group interviews also took place in the hallway after the students presented their final projects while a colleague worked with my students, and again I was able to interview all of the students who turned in consent forms. Through these focus groups, I tried to understand students’ conceptions of the impact of the instructional strategies I employed to engage them in critical literacy practices, as well as the impact of the texts introduced in class.

Audio recording. I recorded the small group discussions of one group of students during the gender and sexuality unit. Generally, I sat in on, listened to, and recorded students’ small group discussions at least once during each unit to guide my instruction. I also audio recorded all of the Socratic Seminar discussions during the gender and sexuality unit. These transcripts were important to the study because they helped me understand how students worked together, the process of how they formed their opinions, and the elements of the course and its texts that seemed to have the most
impact on their discussions. The recordings also captured interactions between the students and me, thus helping me understand how my interactions influenced students’ perceptions, ideas, and beliefs. Finally, the recordings allowed me to listen again to students’ conversations to gain deeper insights as I considered conversational data alongside their written responses.

**Researcher’s journal.** I kept a journal recording my thoughts about the discussions and activities. Herr and Anderson (2005) verify the importance of a journal in action research studies:

> If a researcher is the facilitator or instigator of a change process, part of the research documentation is the researcher’s roles, actions, and decisions. Because of this lived complex reality, keeping a research journal is a vital piece of any action research methodology; it is a chronicle of research decisions; a record of one’s own thoughts, feelings, and impressions; as well as a document reflecting the increased understanding that comes with the action research process. (p. 77)

Although I introduced the majority of the material for this study at the beginning of each week, the concepts filtered through responses to additional texts, drama, speech, and final project activities, and I summarized these responses in my journal. The impromptu speeches were not recorded; therefore, I captured speeches and students’ reactions to speeches that pertained to my dissertation in my researcher’s journal. I wrote in my journal daily, and this gave me a place to reflect on these data each day, so that I altered my teaching plans to better meet the needs of my students. My journal was an essential component to data collection as it served as a tool to evaluate bias (mine and/or my students’), to identify changes, and to illustrate growth and progress in multiple ways.
Organization and Transcription of Data

I kept all audio files of the small group discussions and focus groups on a password-protected computer and copies of the transcripts, audio files, and all digital copies of artifactual data in a password-protected website (Dropbox). All audio recordings were transcribed by my sister and volunteer, Marie Auclair, labeled according to date and topic, and kept in one electronic folder. I typed my journal and kept it in another electronic folder, and each entry was labeled with the date. All artifactual data were photocopied and kept in a three ring binder with dividers labeled with the assignment and date collected. I kept the artifactual data notebook in a locked file cabinet in my classroom.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was ongoing throughout the data collection process, which is consistent with the tenets of action research and grounded theory (Charmaz, 2009; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Mills (2011) suggested that “much of the data collected during the study can be used to positively affect teaching throughout the study ….We can and should take time to analyze our data during the study to decide if what we are learning is what we had hoped to learn” (p. 124). Reflecting on the data throughout the research project provided insights that prompted me to alter instruction to improve learning and ultimately served to answer the questions I sought to understand. In addition, the oppression lens I used to create the study (Figure 1.2) guided my thinking as I analyzed the data.

Analytic and reflective memos. I wrote analytic and reflective memos throughout the data collection process. The memos were different from my Researcher’s
Journal because they not only recorded my observations; the memos became a site for reflecting and interpreting what was going on in my classroom and in my thinking leading to a deeper understanding of my topic. Glesne (2006) explained:

After each day of participant observation, the qualitative researcher takes time for reflective and analytic noting. This is the time to write down feelings, work out problems, jot down ideas and impressions, clarify earlier interpretations, speculate about what is going on, and make flexible short-and long-term plans for the days to come...Analytic noting is a type of data analysis conducted throughout the research process; its contributions range from problem identification, to question development, to understanding the patterns and themes in your work. (p. 59)

At the end of each unit, gender and sexuality, I reread the data, wrote a memo synthesizing my observations, and created primary hypotheses. When I began analyzing my data, I wrote memos throughout the coding process--about one every three coding sessions. The memos provided a trail of my thoughts throughout the process and helped me refine my ideas. I saw this as a necessary tool to use for my study because I was part of the context of the study, and memos assisted in analyzing the occurrences that seemed natural and normal in my everyday context, as well as gave me a space to record my metacognitive reflections on the process of teaching.

Coding. I used a constructionist grounded theory method to study the data.

Charmaz (1994) defined the aspirations of grounded theorists:

Grounded theorists aim to create theoretical categories from the data and then analyze relationships between key categories. In short, the researcher constructs theory from the data. By starting with the data from the lived experiences of the
research participants the researcher can from the beginning, attend to how they construct their worlds. (p. 68)

Charmaz (1994) conveyed the following questions that social constructionists use to study their data:

"How?"; "Why?"; "Under which conditions?"; "With which consequences?" How do people construct beliefs? How do they manage their lives? Why do they think, feel, and act that way? What are the consequences of their beliefs, feelings, and actions? (p. 77)

Charmaz (1994) use of italics emphasized the idea that researchers should be asking themselves these questions as they conduct research. I referenced these questions as I analyzed the data. I began with initial coding of the transcripts using gerunds to identify the action or process that was occurring (Charmaz, 2009). (See Table 3.7 for a listing of codes/gerunds.) Line by line coding using gerunds allowed me to evaluate the process of how students were making meaning:

Line by line coding keeps the researcher examining the collected data, rather than lapsing entirely into theoretical flights of fancy which have little connection to the data. Yet the researcher can invoke his or her theoretical perspective to raise questions about the data. (Charmaz, 1994, p. 81)

I created a chart with all the initial codes and refined them by combining similar process codes and creating a definition for each code. Table 3.7 displays the process codes I used to recode all transcripts.

After initial coding, I realized that data were organized by processes, but I also wanted to explore the content of students’ talk and writing. To do so, I turned to
Table 3.7

**Process Codes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code/Gerunds</th>
<th>Explanation/Behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exploring Contradictions</td>
<td>Questions, statements, examples that expose student feelings about topics, especially with ideas that logically don’t make sense based on our reading or what other’s have said in discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Questions, statements, examples that are tentative in nature and that elicit cognitive tension in others, contradicting statements or examples, exploratory in nature, eliciting more response or talk, shares hypotheses to create open ended discussion,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying</td>
<td>Questions, statements, examples that offer clarification of a topic, explains individuals opinion, sharing stories to elaborate or support opinion, rephrasing another person’s opinion to clarify for self or others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answering</td>
<td>Simple and fixed answers to knowledge level questions, agreement/disagreement statements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Drawing others into a text (text created by group, text given to read and respond to by teacher, text sought out for support ie. Internet, dictionary, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directing</td>
<td>Statements, questions, examples that direct others’ behavior; train of thought, solving problems to manage discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distracting</td>
<td>Comments and sounds that distract other people and draw them into off topic talk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

descriptive coding, which “summarizes in a word or short phrase—most often as a noun—the basic topic of a passage” (p. 70). I reread the data, and, through continued memo writing (Charmaz, 1994; Glasser and Strauss, 1967), developed a different set of codes that were descriptive of the content. Table 3.8 contains the content codes that I used to code all of the transcripts, artifactual data, and my researcher's journal.

Table 3.8

**Content Codes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Statements, questions, explanations, answers that center on how language works, impacts others, has multiple meanings, has connotations and denotations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Explanation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotypes</td>
<td>Statements, questions, explanations, answers that focus on stereotypes of gender or sexual orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norms</td>
<td>Statements, questions, explanations, answers that focus on gender roles, messages from others about sex, expectations for gender or sexual orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Raising”-Influences</td>
<td>Statements, questions, explanations, answers that explain how students derived their attitudes and beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Statements, questions, explanations, answers that explain how students rationalize behavior, attitudes, and beliefs through a religious lens (connects to “raising,” but I thought it was too significant to be lumped together)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phobias Incognito</td>
<td>Statements, questions, explanations, answers that reveal students’ phobias encompassed in alternative lenses: e.g., safety, victim, phobia triangle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovative Cognition</td>
<td>Statements, questions, explanations, answers that illustrate how students are thinking in new ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voyeurism</td>
<td>Statements, questions, explanations, answers that portray students’ curiosity about sexual orientation, gender, sex, transgender not related to oppression/power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>Statements, questions, explanations, answers that explain how students think about equality, double standards, freedom, and oppression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Statements, questions, explanations, answers that demonstrate how students exert their power or want to exert their power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Statements, questions, explanations, answers that demonstrate students using a critical lens to analyze texts, others’ opinions, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>Statements, questions, explanations, answers that disclose their perceptions and impact of the class curriculum (public speaking) or the hidden curriculum of school (what should and should not be taught)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Statements, questions, explanations, answers that explore how individuals identify themselves and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Statements, questions, explanations, answers that demonstrate how power functions in society or individual lives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Constructing categories.** To determine the connection between the codes, I wrote memos and constructed categories. Saldana (2011) explains how category construction operates:

Category construction is our best attempt to cluster the most seemingly alike things into the most seemingly appropriate groups. Categorizing is organizing and ordering the vast array of data from a study because it is from these larger and meaning-rich units that we can better grasp the particular features of each one, and the categories’ possible interrelationships with one another. (p. 91-92)

I examined the content codes and reread the data under each code to determine how they fit together. I constructed the following categories: critical-inquiry stance, environment of the classroom, ways students engaged with the curriculum, ways students experienced the curriculum, and changes students experienced as a result of the curriculum. To assist in my analysis, I took the process and content codes, along with the categories, and developed diagrams to portray the connection between the codes and categories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Saldana, 2011; Saldana, 2009). Diagramming enabled me to create a model to show the interactions between the concepts illustrated in the findings section. Figure 3.1 portrays one diagram that I created on July 7, 2013 to assist my developing understanding and connection between the codes and categories. The diagram illustrates my burgeoning understanding of how the individual codes existed under larger processes, which I identified as the categories. The categories from this diagram were foundational in the creation of future models to explain my data and crucial in facilitating my understanding of how the participants in the study experienced a complex experience. Writing memos, rewriting data codes, and revising the diagram
assisted in the development of my final codes, diagram, and findings. Charmaz (1994) noted the importance of the writing process: "The researcher gains further insights and creates more ideas about the data while writing. Hence, writing and rewriting actually become crucial phases of the analytic process" (p. 86). In addition to rewriting, critical friends (including participants and two doctoral students in my program) deepened the analysis and added to the trustworthiness of the study.

Trustworthiness, Triangulation, and Member Checking

I safeguarded the trustworthiness and rigor of the data by triangulating data from multiple sources, a “strategy [that] reduces the risk of chance associations and of systematic biases, due to a specific method, and allows a better assessment of the generality of the explanations that one develops” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 112). The reflective and analytical memos contributed to the triangulation because they offered a way to create an audit trail to confirm, hypothesize, corroborate data, and illuminate different
aspects of the research (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). I also kept a researcher’s journal, wrote memos, and reflected throughout the entire research process to create an audit trail of my thinking and to attempt to identify my own biases and the impact of my bias on the experience itself and on my interpretation of data. Throughout the dissertation, I endeavored to create transparency through my writing of the entire research process.

Saldana (2011) recommends that researchers “work and write transparently to achieve credibility and trustworthiness with your readers” (p. 136). I attempted to create trust with my readers and with my students by illustrating my research process through clear descriptions of the process that I used to collect, analyze, and report data. I also attempted to create credibility and trustworthiness by revealing my position in relation to my students during instruction as their teacher, as a researcher during data collection throughout the semester, and as a writer to the reader of the dissertation.

It was also important for me to create trustworthiness, specifically with my students, by being transparent about my research and keeping them informed about the research I was conducting. At the beginning of the semester, I informed students about my dissertation research and asked if they were interested in participating in the study. During instructional time, I asked students to engage in the activities naturally and respond to them honestly because, even though I was collecting data for research, there was no correct answer that I was searching to find. I continually kept them informed by sharing my research and insights with them as I engaged in ongoing analyses. Before each assignment and interview, I reiterated that I was collecting the data for my dissertation.
I conducted member checks by giving the transcripts of the interviews and the drafts of findings to participants, asking them to read for accuracy and to ensure that my interpretations were clear and that they felt I captured their experiences as accurately as possible (Saldana, 2009). I also conducted one focus group interview with two students reviewing my findings. In addition, I sent multiple e-mails, revising the findings in different formats to allow readability for my audience and to encourage their feedback. I received responses from six students, and their feedback also allowed participants opportunities to provide insights that constituted further data. For example, participants affirmed my assumption that sharing my personal stories was an effective strategy for engaging students.

**Positionality**

In this research context, I was the primary investigator as well as the instructor. I reflected constantly on my role/positionality in terms of the research process, my teaching, and the students’ learning, because I understood that my interactions in the research context had a strong impact on the study’s design, interpretation of data, and on the students’ learning and engagement with the curriculum. I was an integral part of the curriculum that the students experienced. Another teacher or an outside researcher could use the same curriculum and conduct the study, but the results could be completely different. I believe my professional knowledge and doctoral readings made a difference in my day-to-day interactions with students because I was more reflective about my interactions with them, and I was more conscious of current research pertaining to adolescents. This was especially the case regarding a social justice curriculum that would not be replicable by another teacher with different experience and knowledge.
I come from a White, working class, heterosexual background similar to many of my students, which allowed me to connect to those students in many ways. Many students seemed to feel comfortable confiding in me because we shared these similarities. I was raised Catholic, and I identify as a Christian, and although I had to be very careful about what I shared regarding my religious views with my students in a public school setting, I have a religious tattoo on my wrist that identifies me as a Christian. This was another area in which my participants, the majority of whom come from Christian households, may have identified with me. However, this also means that students from Muslim, Jewish, atheist, LGBTQ, or other backgrounds may not have felt comfortable expressing their views to me. They may have had experiences with Christians who do not value multiple belief systems. Although not all Christians possess anti-gay stances, many Christians equate homosexuality with sin. Anderson (2011) explained:

For most traditionalist Christians, whether the Vatican or US Christian Right groups such as Concerned Women for America, the concept of ‘sexual orientation’ is particularly problematic because it assumes that people are born with different sexual inclinations, whereas they prefer to see homosexuality as a lifestyle choice. At the domestic US level spokespersons for Concerned Women have argued that indifference to homosexuality threatened marriage and the well-being of children. In particular the promotion of gay marriage weakened the family by creating ‘a counterfeit variety of marriage’. And the rejection of marriage was likely to lead to national collapse because ‘since the dawn of civilization, all successful societies have had rules regarding sexual behaviour. All
societies have channelled sex into marriage. When they failed to do this, they lost creative energy and perished. (p. 1599)

Specifically, I realize that my Christianity (particularly as a Christian in a conservatively Christian state) could initially cause LGBTQ students to assume that I may take a stance of sin concerning any orientation other than heterosexual. On the other hand, as a Christian who does not take that stance, LGBTQ students who are Christian may find that there is a range of belief and that they can find a place of safety in our discussions.

I also identify as a teacher, mother, and wife; as the participants in this study got to know me, they identified me with those identities as well. Because I am their teacher, students may or may not have felt comfortable sharing information that they felt may affect their grade. Because I am a mother, depending on experiences with their own mothers, students may or may not have felt comfortable sharing feelings, emotions, and attitudes because they may see me as a nurturer and motherly figure. Because I am a wife, students will identify me as a heterosexual, and therefore may have not felt comfortable sharing feelings, emotions, and attitudes related to sexual orientation with me without fear that they would offend me because I identify as a heterosexual.

Power

As a teacher educated in the Language and Literacy program at a large southeastern university, I understand that students need to exert agency in their learning in order to engage in the learning process and become lifelong learners. As a teacher of 10 years, I understand that my curriculum, classroom routines, and discipline procedures are necessary exertions of my power. In the research process, I exerted my power when it came to trying to ensure that I heard all voices and that students’ behaviors did not
violate school and classroom expectations. I exerted my moral authority when students were engaged in discussions that were controversial and produced, what I saw as, offensive articulations of opinions. For example, when students used derogatory language like “faggot” and “queer,” I used the guidelines for classroom discourse (Appendix G) that we created as a class to guide our discussions and to deter hurtful comments, as well as used questions to interrogate those opinions to enable students to understand how verbalizing or acting on those opinions could be hurtful to other people.

My major concern regarding my power in the research process was that I control the environment and the curriculum. I was concerned that when I interviewed students, they would obviously know my thoughts on many of the topics we discussed in class and possibly changed their responses to fit what they thought I wanted to hear. I used students’ written responses as an assurance that their responses were consistent.

**Ethical Issues and Reciprocity**

Discussing gender roles and sexual orientation is a discomforting topic for many students and parents. By openly talking about these topics, LGBTQ students may become targets or be made to feel uncomfortable. It was important for me as the facilitator to maintain a safe environment where, to the best of my ability, I communicated to students that all opinions were valued but also to discourage what I saw as hurtful, destructive comments. In order to accomplish this goal, as mentioned in the previous section, at the beginning of the semester we discussed rules for civil discourse and constantly reflected on those goals and consequences for not following the rules as a class. I believe this helped minimize student distress and created a safe environment for student discussions.
The benefit of the study was for all students to have explored, personally and critically, topics and assumptions that often go unquestioned by many people. In addition, I believe that my teaching practices improved because of studying and reflecting on student responses and altering my teaching to meet student needs. Teachers in schools similar to mine may benefit from reading my research. Identifying as an ally to LGBTQ students may potentially create safe space for affirmation of students in my class or school. Also, I provided a model for other potential allies, opening a space for them to come forward, which may also have a positive impact on the overall school atmosphere in the future.

Limitations/Potentialities

One limitation of this study is that I conducted it in an elective class; therefore, it limits the implications for traditional English Language Arts teachers bound by more specific curricular standards. However, I believe in the potential for this kind of curriculum and that it can be adapted to an English curriculum, working within standards guidelines. Nevertheless, more research is needed on integrating it into an oppressive educational environment that does not support curricula grounded in state or national standards.

Conclusion to Chapter III

This chapter detailed the framework for the methodologies used in this study. The next chapter reports the findings of the study based on the model that emerged from data analysis. Examples from transcripts, artifactual data, and my research journal are incorporated to support the findings.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS: A CYCLE OF TRANSFORMATION IN SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

It is widely documented that many educational institutions are inhospitable places for LGBTQ students, in part because of the lack of positive representation of LGBTQ identities in the curriculum (Banks, 2009; Blackburn and Buckley, 2005; Winans, 2006). My experiences as a high school teacher and researcher in the field of education help me recognize the persistent biases that are held against LGBTQ students (Blackburn, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Kosciw, 2010; Ryan, 2003) as well as lack of opportunity for all students to discuss LGBTQ issues and issues of gender in schools (Clark and Blackburn, 2009; Szalacha, 2003). This study explored ways that negative portrayals of LGBTQ and gender nonconforming youth might be altered through the incorporation - in a high school Public Speaking class - of texts about LGBTQ and gender-related topics and critical discussions surrounding media stereotypes, heteronormativity, heterosexual privilege, and gender. The texts and topics that I included in this study provided students with information about issues faced by LGBTQ and gender nonconforming people, and also introduced positive portrayals and accomplishments of LGBTQ people (see list of texts in Appendix A). In the context of this class, the purpose of this study was to investigate ways that critical literacy practices, used in conjunction with a social justice curriculum, might encourage students to investigate their
attitudes, beliefs, and actions about LGBTQQ and gender nonconforming people. The following questions guided the study:

- What happens when a critical literacy/social justice approach to curriculum and teaching is used in a grades 9-12 Public Speaking class to support students’ examination of attitudes, beliefs, and actions regarding the discrimination against and oppression of LGBTQQ people and related issues?
- How does the inclusion of specific texts, discussions, and assignments impact students’ beliefs about LGBTQQ issues?
- How does the inclusion of texts, discussions, and assignments impact students’ beliefs about gender roles?
- How does the inclusion of texts, discussions, and assignments about gender roles impact students’ beliefs about LGBTQQ issues?
- How does the inclusion of specific instructional strategies and texts impact students’ beliefs about LGBTQQ people as agents versus victims?

The findings discussed in this section are in response to these questions and specific to my classroom, students, and curriculum. It is important to emphasize that while I believe that insights from this study will be useful for other researchers and educators, I do not write about findings as generalizable across groups, people, or contexts. These are my interpretations (at this moment in time) of what participants involved in this study experienced (Charmaz, 1994; Mills, 2011; Saldana, 2009) informed by member checking that asked for participants’ views about my interpretations of data. This disposition toward qualitative inquiry is informed and supported by the work of
scholars such as Charmaz (2011) who summarized the situated nature of the qualitative research process:

The interactions between the researcher and the data result in 'discovering' i.e. creating, categories. In short, the 'discovery' process consists of the researcher creating discoveries about the data and constructing the analysis. How the analyst used the method and which questions he or she brings to the data shape the results. (p. 75)

Thus, I recognize that findings do not emerge from data but are constructed by the researcher who is positioned in particular ways (see Chapter III). As previously stated, I grounded my data analysis in an oppression lens, which means I paid explicit attention to how students understood power, privilege, and oppression related to the concepts of gender and sexuality. Although the Cycle of Transformation in Social Justice Education (CTSJE) framework that organizes my findings (discussed below) provides a comprehensive view of the students' experience in the context of the social justice curriculum, discussion of how their experiences enact an oppression lens are explored in the Discussion. As you read excerpts of student discussions, note the ways in which students may be perpetuating or interrupting homophobia, heteronormativity, or a victim stance; these will be discussed after the findings are presented. With this understanding, I present findings carefully analyzed and shaped by my positionality, interests, and convictions.

**Conceptual Foundation and the Organization of this Chapter:**

A Cycle of Transformation in Social Justice Education (CTSJE)

As a result of my analysis of data, I created a model that helped me organize this discussion. I call this model, *A Cycle of Transformation in Social Justice Education*
The model (Figure 4.1) correlates with the research questions, provides a conceptual foundation to the discussion of findings as detailed in this chapter, and names the processes that my students seemed to experience during the 18 weeks they were in my Public Speaking class focusing on the study of gender and LGBTQ issues.

The three phases in the CTSJE model are: Engaging, Becoming, Transforming, however, the term phases is not used to convey that this was a linear process. I use present participle verbs to name each phase of the model in order to convey the idea that the action is ongoing and dynamic. During the study, the students constantly moved in and out of the three phases of the CTSJE model, and may continue to do so as they reflect on course experiences in the future. Therefore, I posit that the CTSJE was never and will never be completed.

![Figure 4.1. Visual Representation of Cycle of Transformation in Social Justice Education](image)

Findings are discussed as they correspond with the three major elements of the CTSJE model, however, the three components of the CTSJE model also weave
throughout the findings (Table 4.1). The first section – Impact on Engagement - encompasses findings that focus on how the students learned. It is followed by sections focusing on Becoming and on Transforming that describe what they learned and how that learning was beginning to translate into potential for action. Throughout this chapter, findings are presented as illuminated by multiple data sources and as they were experienced by participants.

Table 4.1

Overview of Findings According to the CTSJE Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component of CTSJE</th>
<th>Findings</th>
<th>Components of Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact on Engagement</td>
<td>(a) Intentionally-constructed environment</td>
<td>Co-constructed rules of engagement, tone of voice and humor, personal stories, techniques for keeping it real, models of vulnerability, and communicating views without indoctrination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) Intentionally-created curriculum</td>
<td>Articles and videos- Human Sexuality is Complicated... (Green, 2012), a compilation of Think B4 You Speak commercials (GLSEN, 2008), 50 Shades of Gay (Wright, 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(c) Intentionally-developed instructional strategies</td>
<td>Explicit instruction, creating opportunities for peer discussion, and helping students develop an inquiry lens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on Becoming</td>
<td>(a) Developing a critical eye</td>
<td>Disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, and focusing on the sociopolitical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) Uncovering messages about gender, sexuality and stereotype</td>
<td>Rigid gender and sexuality roles and stereotypes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(c) Uncovering origins of beliefs</td>
<td>school (explicit and implicit messages), religious messages, and home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(d) Uncovering and grappled with contradictions</td>
<td>anger and resistance, concealed prejudice and transphobia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(e) Uncovering their own roles in perpetuating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Impact on Engagement

I entered this study with the aim of engaging students in curricula that invited them to question norms in their own lives and in society and the belief that students must take risks by interacting with the activities and materials. I define the term engagement as moving beyond regurgitation of knowledge delivered by the teacher or reiterated from students’ lived experience to creating new meaning through the use of critical social practices and enacting a critical stance (Lewison, Leland, and Harste, 2008). Data analysis leads me to believe that a combination of teaching approaches and instructional tools encouraged students to comprehend, connect, question, and create new meaning – engage. I found that if students did not attend to the texts they read or viewed in video format, the discussion that followed was not productive or engaged; therefore, using specific teaching approaches and instructional tools (discussed below) was an effective impetus to initiate conversations and support engagement throughout the study. The three primary catalysts for student engagement seemed to be: (a) an intentionally-constructed environment, (b) intentionally-created curriculum, and (c) intentionally-developed instructional strategies.
Intentionally-Constructed Environment

Creating a caring and supportive environment was crucial for students to maintain engagement in the social justice curriculum and to move students toward other elements of the CTSJE model (Becoming and Transforming). An environment where students felt able to share their opinions, struggle with conflicts, and discuss a variety of theories and points of view appeared to be necessary to allow students to reveal what influenced their individual views as well as how mainstream societal views impacted their own beliefs. This supports Bell and Griffin (2007) who advocate for creating spaces where:

A person's defenses can be more permeable. In this case, despite the experience of internal conflict, the person may be willing to consider new information and grapple with the contradictions and discrepancies they perceive. (p. 73)

The literature and my study suggest that, to be supportive of students’ examination of bias, environments must offer them a place to struggle with their biases, prejudices, and to recognize how oppression works in society. Students identified me as an integral part of instruction and, as the teacher who planned the course, I am a primary tool in constructing a supportive environment. Considering my role as foundational, analysis of data allowed me to identify a range of structures and strategies that built an environment in which students engaged. Those structures and strategies included the use of: co-constructed rules of engagement, tone of voice and humor, personal stories, techniques for keeping it real (avoiding deflection, models of vulnerability), and communicating views without indoctrination.

Co-constructed rules of engagement. In previous years as I introduced students to topics in the social justice curriculum (race, class, gender, and sexuality), their
reactions were sometimes contentious and led to limited engagement in the discussions. For example, when we discussed welfare within the class unit, some students expressed disparaging remarks about people who use and abuse the welfare system or when we discussed immigration in the racism unit, a few of the students were exasperated that undocumented citizens were not deported immediately. Although I did not collect data at that time to understand their reactions, it appeared to me that their contentions were because the topics challenged their privileges (unearned advantages because of their race, gender, class, or sexual orientation) and contested their uninterrogated beliefs about how privileging one group creates disadvantages for another group. Consequently, as I began the course that is the basis of this study, I asked the students to help me in co-construction rules for discourse hoping to create a foundation for students to rely on when they approached contentious topics and beliefs. As described in this section, these rules seemed to encourage engagement throughout the semester. Most students used the rules to negotiate tensions that emerged and, as a consequence, remained engaged, but sometimes the students did not use the rules, tensions were not negotiated, and engagement was not maintained.

As a class, we brainstormed a list of discourse behaviors or rules that we felt would positively support discussion, encourage everyone to share, and assist students as they communicated different opinions. After the students had discussed a text in small groups, I asked them to think about their dialogue in the small groups and brainstorm a list of helpful rules that could guide our future discussions. I listed the suggested rules on the board and we accepted the suggestions as a preliminary set of rules that we used to
guide our dialogue. The students and I revised the rules throughout the semester to meet the needs of the class. The initial list of discourse rules included:

- Do not get off topic.
- Do not interrupt.
- Give everyone a chance to speak before changing topic.
- Do not put someone down for his or her opinion.
- Everyone - talk, talk, talk.

As the class continued, I noticed that some groups only addressed surface level topics about the text or briefly shared their initial responses. Therefore, after the first six small group discussions, I asked students to reflect on their discussions and our rules to determine if we needed to adjust or add some rules to enhance our discussions. As a result, we set the following goals as new rules to improve our interactions:

- Encourage other people to talk.
- Make connections to each other.
- Look more closely at the text and analyze it critically.

From day one, I worked with students to express their opinions in ways that were not offensive to other group members by setting discourse rules and goals and abiding by them with reminders such as, “Mean what you say, say what you mean, but don’t say it mean” (C. Auclair, personal communication, May 22, 2009). This quote is a piece of advice I shared with the class to keep in mind as they prepared to engage in small group discussions.

*When the rules were used.* The co-constructed rules we initially created and later revised usually worked to support and sustain engagement if students used them. The
following excerpt illustrates how some students used the rules to confront misunderstandings and move past friction without halting the conversation. Although this excerpt shows students staying on topic, not interrupting, and encouraging everyone to talk, it highlights the rule of not putting someone down for their opinion (see initial rules listed above). In this example, Greg shares an inaccurate stereotype, which his group challenges without putting Greg down for his opinion, maintaining his engagement in the conversation:

**Greg:** You kinda tell when a gay person is gay like a girl, cause they either cut their hair or dye it some funky color.

**Vadasz:** Not necessarily.

**Zumbob:** Mmmnnn I've known girls that were straight up gay and I had no idea until they told me.

**Greg:** Oh. Well you can tell when a girl is gay though, if she is gay you can if she expresses it you can tell.

[chatter]

**Zumbob:** What if Kimberly was gay? You'd have no idea.

**Greg:** I wouldn't have no idea.

(May 21, 2013, sexuality group interview, group one)

In this excerpt, Zumbob confronts Greg’s inaccurate stereotypes of homosexual women. Grounded in the discussion rules, Zumbob asked questions to probe Greg’s understanding and exposed his misunderstanding without putting him down, which encouraged Greg to engage in the conversation instead of shutting down.

An additional rule that sustained engagement was encouraging others to talk. As a class, we noticed that some students dominated conversations and others only participated occasionally; therefore, we included the rule that required the more talkative
students to urge less talkative students to share their opinions, connections, and ideas. To illustrate, the next example portrays members in the group imploring one of the less talkative members to participate:

Teacher: Alright so who’s going to share out for our group and what are they going to say?

Noah: I think Greg should share out

Vadasz: Yeah, he doesn’t talk much. It would be good to get you out of your shell.

Teacher: Okay so what do we want Greg to share?

Vadasz: How he felt he had a good opinion that was different from

Zumbob: No. Me and Greg felt the same way so

Vadasz: Yeah that was different from Noah’s.

Even in this short excerpt, it is noticeable that Vadasz speaks more often than the other students in the group, but she elicits participation from Greg. The example illustrates how this rule of engagement was used to influence other group members to engage in the group discussion or activity.

**When rules were not used.** Although the rules of engagement were useful and I believe necessary to keep students involved productively in the discussions, sometimes the students failed to use the rules to maintain engagement or prevent conflict. For example, in Ariel’s social justice end-of-year portfolio she disclosed her frustration regarding our discussions: “The class discussions just made me mad because some people made rude comments and basically didn’t agree with some of the things I agree with and it was chaos.” Based on my observations of Ariel’s behavior when she remained silent or showed exasperation in her body language when one of her group members failed to
listen to her opinion, this response leads me to believe that she often disengaged when “chaos” ensued, which was in part because many students were not following the rules. If the students in her group had listened to each other’s opinions and made connections, Ariel may not have been frustrated. When they followed the rules, students often pulled each other back into the conversation when they began to stray from it with reminders such as: “We can bring each other back in when we see that we are drifting” (April 16, 2013, Socratic Seminar, Vadasz).

Sometimes in small group discussions, some group members unintentionally ostracized other students from the discussion by not adhering to the co-constructed rules. This occurred when some students did not give everyone a chance to speak or encourage others to talk, two of the co-constructed rules of discussion. For example, in the following excerpt, Noah, who was a member of this discussion group, was completely absent from the two-minute conversation and yet none of the other group members made attempts to draw her in:

Vadasz: Ok so one thing I don't understand is without women there would be no man so why do men get so much credit for everything?

Zumbob: What I’d said is my first thing is

Vadasz: You sounded Demi when you said that because she always says that and like doesn’t say what sh’ like doesn't say anything that relates to the question. Well, what I wrote was I dunno you just sounded like her. [laughter] Sorry you just really

Zumbob: What made men better salesmen? Ya know, I mean like what made men so much better at selling things than women?

Vadasz: That was funny he was like omg he dropped em’ no he didn't [laughter] You scared me, you got me, good one. You got me that time. You did. The guy from customs in Atlanta was like, you got a real country accent anybody ever told you that? I was like never
heard that one before.

**Tone of Voice and Humor**

Patterns in data made it clear that the tone of voice and humor I used when interacting with the students played an important role in engaging the students. For example, at one point Greg talked about how I made the gender unit interesting by using voice tone, humor, and “fun.” He wrote:

You kept me interested with the fun tone you had in your voice and the way when somebody would bring something that related to the topic and we would have fun talking about it but we were still learning. We still learned and had fun at the same time.

Greg explicitly stated that my tone of voice conveyed a sense of fun, which I assume to refer to the humorous tone that I used to facilitate discussions and approach students. For example, I might say something like, “I ain’t about that life” or “YOLO” (an acronym for you only live once) to bring humor into our interactions. Throughout our conversations, I often maintained this kind of light hearted and teasing tone that appeared to keep the students engaged. This seemed to engage students like Greg throughout the learning process.

Even during serious and thought-provoking conversations, my tone of voice and sense of humor appeared to keep students engaged. Another example occurred when students were working on their research notes for their persuasive speeches; Zumbob, Noah, and Deeej were each researching topics on their iPads. Noah read aloud about statistics related to teen abstinence programs and Deeej made the comment that the television show, *Teen Mom*, increased teen pregnancy by 45%; I said, “No way- prove it”
in a lighthearted tone to motivate him to find research to support his statement. He laughed and said, “I will” and furiously began searching the internet to support his statement.

My jocular tone also seemed to set the foundation for future conversations by establishing a foundation for humor. The following excerpt from the sexuality unit interview portrays the humor that infused our classroom discussions and seemed supportive of the students’ engagement:

Zumbob: God made you a woman for a reason. Not to be like -
Teacher: Why did he make me a woman? To serve men? Just kidding.
Vadasz: To have
Zumbob: Oh, yeah. Oh yeah. Oh she pulled that card.
Teacher: I'm just giving you a hard time.
Zumbob: To make you a sandwich.
Vadasz: Well I think that -
Teacher: I'm just kidding.

Through examples like this the use of humor seemed to foster students’ engagement.

**Using Personal Stories to Relate**

Sharing stories about my life was another strategy that enabled me to create an environment that engaged students. This seemed to allow many students to view me as an approachable person, not just their teacher. In the following excerpt, Noah, Zumbob, Vadasz, Greg, and I discussed the impact that language has on an individual’s emotional state; during the discussion, I shared my personal feelings about the impact of language.
I used personal stories to demonstrate that I trusted my students enough to share my personal life and encouraged them to reciprocate:

Teacher: I mean regardless if it hurts my feelings. I'm very sensitive. My feelings get hurt very easily but it doesn't make me cry. Like I don't cry about it.

Noah: You just beat yourself up on the inside and wish you would die on the inside.

Teacher: I do. Well, I don't wish I would die but I wish I would lose 50 pounds you know when people say that I'm fat and I look like I'm pregnant in my third block class. Yeah.

Noah: They said that?

Teacher: Yes.

Noah: That really hurt your feelings.

Vadasz: This isn't third block.

Teacher: Yes it hurts my feelings.

Through stories like this, many students seemed able to connect to me as a person with feelings. This in turn seemed to lead to their further engagement in our discussions. In the following excerpt, the story I shared portrayed my own learning and growth as a parent:

Teacher: Well, even-even as a parent, like and I'm a very open minded parent I'm like, you know. That would be difficult for me you know what I mean to just be like ok, I'll let you be a boy today. No that-you know. That I would be- 

Vadasz: Honestly.

Noah: Hold on hold on wait a second.

Vadasz: Hold on if Riley came to you and she was like I'm shaving my hair because the boys won't let me play basketball and I want to be a boy.
Teacher: Absolutely not.

Zumbob: Ok so hold on.

Vadasz: Why not? Why not? Everyone-

Zumbob: You said-way back that you would allow them to-her to play with boy toys and her-him to play with girl toys.

Vadasz: What's the difference? Except for disses in public?

Teacher: If she shaved her hair?

Noah: It's hair like

Vadasz: Hair-it grows back.

Noah: It'll grow back.

Teacher: I dunno. It stresses me out though.

Vadasz: But what if that's honestly what she wanted like that's what would make her happy?

Teacher: I mean-if she

Teacher: I'm just being honest with you.

Vadasz: Oh.

Teacher: I'm just being honest.

Vadasz: I mean I wouldn't but you're a lot more open minded than I am.

Teacher: And that's what I'm saying, being honest. I am open minded but at that point I feel like she would change her mind, you know what I mean?

Vadasz: Yeah, I would never let my kid do that

I felt that communicating my struggles with parenthood allowed students to see me in different ways. These excerpts portray students persistently probing me for more information after I shared personal stories. This certainly demonstrated a level of comfort
that many students had with me to probe in that way and it also created opportunities for them to make their own connections to my stories.

**Keeping It Real: Avoiding Deflection**

I define “keeping things real” as not censoring the topics we discussed, not deflecting from but persevering with responses to sometimes difficult conversational topics. My attempts to keep things real seemed to have a positive effect on the students’ engagement. Vadasz indicated this with the comment, “I liked how you keep things real,” explaining that she appreciated that I did not curtail conversations that explored uncomfortable or dissenting feelings. While I found this to be true during our studies of gender and of sexuality, the strongest examples stand out in the researcher’s journal I kept from January 2013 to May 2013 during the race unit. Even though this finding comes from students’ engagement around a unit outside the specific focus of this study, I feel that it provides an example of similar *keeping it real* strategies that were important elements in engaging the kids during the gender/sexuality units.

During the race unit, after we read Peggy McIntosh’s (1988) article *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To see Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies* Candace, a White student, commented that she did not recognize the examples of White Privilege discussed in the article. Noah, an African American student, responded that she had observed many of the examples that McIntosh wrote about, to which Candace replied, “Of course you do” in a sarcastic tone of voice rejecting the concept of White Privilege and suggesting that Noah saw White Privilege because she was African American rather than for its validity as a universal truth. At this point, the racial tension in the group was palpable, but I allowed the conversation to
continue without deflecting to another topic. Noah countered with, “The article was written by a White woman” providing a clear contradiction to Candace’s belief that only African Americans recognized White Privilege. The class laughed in a way that indicated their support for Noah’s comment. Although Candace initially seemed shocked by Noah’s statement, she smiled and laughed along with the rest of her group. While I do not know if Candace altered her views, this excerpt is one illustration of how I attempted to *keep it real*—keep the conversation alive—by not halting or deflecting from a tense discussion about the lived experience of race in students’ lives.

**Modeling Vulnerability**

Discussing issues of power, privilege, oppression, and identity often rendered students vulnerable as we exposed our views with each other. Being open about lived experiences and opinions often made them susceptible to other people’s judgments and criticisms. A strategy that helped me create an environment that supported many students’ engagement in spite of their feelings of vulnerability was modeling my own vulnerable moments. One way in which I intentionally tried to model vulnerability was to be reflective about myself as a learner and to be open about moments when I was required to rethink my stance or my utterance. The following incident, captured in my research journal, demonstrates how I exposed my vulnerability by allowing students to call me out when they felt that I was making stereotypical comments:

- Ariel did her persuasive speech on the right of homosexuals to adopt children. One quote she used was from a Republican politician supporting homosexual adoption rights. I made the comment it was interesting that a Republican made that comment. Zumbob said that I was being stereotypical. I said you are right,
and gave him a high five for calling me out and taking me to task for doing the very thing that I am encouraging them not to do. I was sitting in the group/audience and when other students saw what was going on they wanted to know what happened so I made a brief announcement and recalled what just transpired for the rest of the class.

By declaring that I made a mistake in front of the class, I showed that I was not infallible and that I am vulnerable to accepting mainstream stereotypes. Accepting and modeling my vulnerability engaged many students to the point that they seemed more comfortable revealing their own vulnerabilities. When I met with them for member checking, students agreed that the times when I made my vulnerability visible were supportive of their own engagement.

Another example that illustrates how exposing my own vulnerability supported student engagement occurred in a discussion with group one. Vadasz posited a hypothetical situation about whether or not I would allow my own child to defy traditional gender norms. Although throughout the semester I tried to convey an open-mindedness about gender and sexuality through my text choices, instruction, and conversations, I continued to experience my own discomfort at certain points. Through discussion and professional reading, I pushed myself beyond those boundaries. In the process, I made my own reflections, contradictions, and learning visible to the students. Many students were astounded that I felt tension regarding gender and sexuality restrictions and my story of self-discovery connected us.

In the following excerpt, I shared my uneasiness with allowing my own daughter freedom from gender stereotypes. In the process, I exposed my susceptibility to narrow
societal norms as well as my courage to make myself vulnerable by sharing views that were contradictory to the stance the students saw me take about gender nonconforming bias:

Teacher: Well, even as a parent, like and I'm a very open minded parent I'm like, you know. That would be difficult for me you know what I mean to just be like ok, I'll let you be a boy today. No that-you know. That would be

Vadasz: Honestly.

Noah: Hold on hold on wait a second.

Vadasz: Hold on if Riley came to you and she was like I'm shaving my hair because the boys won't let me play basketball and I want to be a boy.

Teacher: Absolutely not.

Zumbob: Ok so hold on.

Vadasz: Why not? Why not? Everyone

Zumbob: You said-way back that you would allow them to-her to play with boy toys and her-him to play with girl toys.

Vadasz: What's the difference? Except for disses in public?

Teacher: If she shaved her hair?

Noah: It's hair like

Vadasz: Hair-it grows back.

Noah: It'll grow back.

Teacher: I dunno. It stresses me out though.

Vadasz: But what if that's honestly what she wanted like that's what would make her happy?

Teacher: I mean-if she

Teacher: I'm just being honest with you.
In this excerpt, I shared my grappling with parenthood and gender roles and demonstrated my continued learning, expressing my vulnerability to my students. In turn, the students actively engaged by asking questions, challenging my position, and connecting with their own opinions.

**Communicating Views without Indoctrination**

Challenging homophobia and heterosexism in a conservative school district presented an obstacle as I attempted to balance counterarguments of mainstream narratives with students’ voices and opinions and my own views. I communicated my views through text choices and responses to student questions, but tried to do so while creating a supportive environment that prevented students from feeling indoctrinated by my personal beliefs. This seemed to make many students comfortable taking risks with their learning and to openly share their opinions. Even though many students were able to surmise my opinions, the fact that they continued to share their own opinions led me to believe that they did not feel indoctrinated by my views. The following discussion took place during the sexuality unit interview with group one. During the interview, the
students indicated that they recognized my personal views about sexuality but did not feel as if I was forcing those views on them:

Zumbob: That we're-we can talk about gay people but we can't talk about bible. I mean I don't-it doesn't bother me that we can't

Teacher: You-I mean you can talk about the bible.

Zumbob: But I'm saying teachers can't.

Teacher: Yeah.

Vadasz: But you can talk about your views on gay people.

Zumbob: Yeah.

Teacher: I mean I don't share my views.

Vadasz: We know how you feel about it.

Zumbob: Yeah you do

Teacher: I mean you're

Vadasz: But maybe it's because we can read your body language and we know you and the way you act towards things like and the way you think the things that you don't like.

Zumbob: Yeah

Teacher: Yeah but I-but I also like you can you can ask me about my religion and I could answer you know what I mean, especially like this like I can tell you

Vadasz: But you can't tell us what we should believe.

Teacher: Right.

Vadasz: Which I mean you're not telling us what to believe about gay people

Teacher: Exactly.

Vadasz: So yeah.
This discussion illuminates how I tried to clearly communicate my beliefs and opinions about sexuality without making students feel that they had to believe and reiterate my beliefs in order to be successful in the class. The students seemed to pick up on my intentions by making comments stating their assumptions about how I felt about same-sex marriage or other political conversations that arose regarding sexuality throughout the semester. I wanted to give them the freedom to challenge my ideas and engage in open inquiry specifically because I did not want them to feel indoctrinated. Vadasz indicated that she understood my goals when she commented, “I mean you’re not telling us what to believe about gay people.” In another example (during the same interview), Greg openly shared his negative views about homosexuality. He said, “I don't like gay people. I don't like transgender, I don't believe in all that and I just don't want it to happen.” His frankness suggests that he did not feel indoctrinated by my views and that it could be that the manner in which I shared my views that led to his sense of comfort and engagement.

**Intentionally-Created Curriculum**

As the primary researcher and teacher, I planned the curriculum, developed activities, and chose texts that were responsive to students’ needs in conjunction with key concepts of the curriculum. These elements of my intentionally-planned curriculum were further strategies that seemed to engage the students in discussion and reflection. Choosing texts for the gender and sexuality unit was challenging because there were specific concepts that I wanted to introduce to students in order to push them forward in their thinking. In addition, the text choices had to interest students, be accessible to students with a wide range of literacy abilities, and generate discussion. The texts in the social justice curriculum encompassed: videos, diagrams, pictures, and articles (see
Appendix P). My analysis of data led me to consider ways that my curricular choices had a direct impact on students’ responses. Different kinds of texts seemed to engage and affect students in unique ways. For many students, the videos had the greatest impact; for a few, the articles we read were the most influential.

**Articles.** One curricular choice I made was to require students to read articles that I surmised would enhance and increase their knowledge of gender and sexuality and that would challenge normative beliefs. Several students - Faith, Hannah, and Deeej – mentioned that the articles we read in class not only engaged them in deeper reflections but led to changes in their views. In an interview with these students following the gender unit, I asked them if they experienced any changes in themselves and what led to those changes. Deeej identified the articles as an important component of his growth:

> Probably like the articles you read and like seeing how hard it was for them to like go through life and have to like decide and it’s like not their fault and it’s just like changes your born with, not having a normal life.

The article Deeej was referring to was “The Transgender Athlete” (Ridley, 2012) that describes the obstacles that transgender athletes face in competitive sports. The article itself presents the complicated nature of gender and sports, and I chose it because I hypothesized the tensions in the article would provoke and foster discussion around the complex nature of gender. In addition, I appreciated that the author positioned many of the transgender athletes in the article as agents of change while faced with bias because they identified as transgender. Although the students continued to identify transgender people as victims, this article did enable Deeej and his group members - Faith and Hannah, who agreed with his response-to see normalcy in being transgendered.
Further evidence of the impact of articles on some students’ engagement came in the social justice portfolio reflections (Appendix T) that the students completed at the end of the semester. To prompt their reflection, I asked, “What impact did the texts studied have on your concept of gender and sexuality?” The following excerpts illustrate the impact that the articles had on student growth and learning:

Noah:  Made everything made sense. Put everything into perspective.

Zumbob: I really liked learning about all of this, some of it [information in the articles] really blew my mind.

Hannah: The texts made me understand how people feel when others are mean to them based on who they like or how they appear.

The students did not identify specific titles of articles, but through these statements, it is apparent that the ideas and information in the written texts in general engaged some students and presented them with new concepts and perspectives that they had not been previously exposed to.

Videos. Another intentional curricular choice I made was the inclusion of videos that I assumed would not only increase student knowledge about gender and sexuality, but would retain their interest in order to maintain engagement. Patterns in the data demonstrate that the videos were more effective for many students than the articles because videos kept their attention. Vadasz explained her preference for videos in an interview following the gender unit: “I dislike reading the articles. I don’t pay attention and they’re boring. But watching videos, commercials, or just having discussions really keeps my attention.”

In the written reflections about the texts and videos, no one identified specific videos that made an impact on their learning or beliefs, but through probing in the
interviews conducted after the gender and sexuality unit, several students provided thought provoking responses. Discussed in the following sections are the videos that many students discussed avidly, videos that engaged them to greater and lesser extents: *Human Sexuality is Complicated*... (Green, 2012), a compilation of *Think B4 You Speak* commercials (GLSEN, 2008), and *50 Shades of Gay* (Wright, 2013).

**Human Sexuality is Complicated (video).** On April 15th, I showed the video *Human Sexuality is Complicated*... (2013), wherein Hank Green animatedly discusses the notion that it is the nature of humans to place people in binary positions of gender and sexuality, when in reality individuals fall on a continuum of both gender and sexuality. He uses diagrams to aid his informative speech and to illustrate the difference between sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, romantic orientation, sexual behavior, and gender roles. In the following excerpt from the gender interview, Vadasz, Noah, and Zumbob identified how the video held their attention, expanded their knowledge, and challenged their beliefs:

- **Teacher:** What led to any changes you experienced during the unit?
- **Noah:** The pictures helped you
- **Vadasz:** Oh the diagram on the
- **Noah:** Oh yeah the diagram on the video definitely like hit home.
- **Zumbob:** Oh yeah that was crazy.
- **Teacher:** The human sexuality video?
- **Zumbob:** Yeah
- **Vadasz:** I’m still confused about how you can be sexually attracted to someone-like being sexually attracted and romantically attracted but it’s two different attracted tos-it’s two different
Teacher: Mmmmmmmhmm. Outside of class how have these discussions and text of gender influenced you?

Noah: It hasn’t but I’ve told my friends about it because I thought it was pretty interesting

This data excerpt suggests that this particular video held such power and engagement for Noah that she shared it outside of the classroom. The video also complicated Vadasz’s prior assumption that the binaries of gender and sexuality are perpetuated through heteronormative discourse and practices in many of the students’ lives, especially at school (Blackburn, 2012).

Think B4 You Speak Videos. On May 6th, I played a series of commercials produced by The Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) from their Think B4 You Speak campaign. The intended targets of the commercials are teenagers focusing on the reduction of homophobic remarks like, “That’s so gay” commonly heard in classrooms and hallways across the United States. The following excerpts portray how the three Think B4 You Speak videos captured many students’ attention and engagement and propelled their learning about gender and sexuality:

Excerpt 1

Ralph: I like the commercials just because it was visual. And like you didn’t have to read it and I like every once in a while if I could like see something or watch something I learn a little better. And I kinda had the opposite view of Brian like when I saw celebrities or saw people I knew I kinda like related because when I’m reading the only thing I-I just see words I don’t see people it has like a little more emotional effect to it.

(May, 21, 2013, Sexuality Unit Interview, Group interview with Lucifer, Fernando, Ralph)
Excerpt 2

Ariel: Those were interesting because you don’t have to read them, they catch your eye

Teacher: Ok so the commercials work for you

Deeej: They were kinda funny, especially like the black girl

Ariel: Yeah

(May 21, 2013, Sexuality Unit Interview, group two)

These excerpts illustrate how the videos captured students’ attention and engagement because the video was short in length, used humor, and included celebrities. Throughout the semester, and especially towards the end of the semester, I found that the length of video was crucial to captivating students’ attention. If the video was over five minutes in length, many students began to put their heads down, text on their phone, or talk to their neighbor. The use of humor and celebrities in these commercials also engaged most students and encouraged them to pay attention to the message the commercial was attempting to convey.

50 Shades of Gay. On May 13th, I presented a video of iO Tillett Wright delivering a speech about her photography project that complicates the binary nature of sexuality by humanizing individuals that suffer from discrimination because of their perceived sexuality. I chose to show this video at the end of the sexuality unit because it presents the concept of sexuality as a continuum, which I hoped (based on many student responses to texts) would challenge their binary conceptions of sexuality. The excerpts below reveal how the video successfully contested some students’ perceptions about sexuality and promoted discussion/engagement while, for other students, the video did not sustain their attention:
Excerpt 1

Teacher: What are the likes and dislikes you have in the unit [sexuality]

Ralph: Ohhh that. I don’t know—it’s just I don’t know I just didn’t like it.

Lucifer: You just think it was kinda just -

Ralph: Dragged on and boring

Teacher: Because it was so long.

Ralph: And yeah about that and it was just it was weird how she put everything together cause like I don’t get how the faces of people - gay people are supposed to like make a difference.

Lucifer: It’s supposed to make you - look at people around you and say what if they’re gay, you know. It’s the people around you you know there’s countless people you see every day out there that basically could be gay.

(Group interview with Lucifer, Fernando, Ralph, Sexuality Unit Interview, May 21, 2013)

Excerpt 2

Teacher: So was it [self-identified changes] any activities or was it like any readings or…something that we watched that kind of like-or was it just all together?

Ansley: I think the first time I realized that I was closed minded about it and like and I realized that I became open minded is when we watched that girl where it was like the

Teacher: 50 Shades of Gay

Ansley: Yeah that girl, that’s when I realized I was more open minded about it. Cause then before then I’d just be like gay girls no. And then after watching that I was like yeah and [indistinct] who are like she’s inspirational about how confident she is to just come out like that.

(Group Interview with Tyler, Ansley, Britt Britt, Sexuality Unit Interview, May 21, 2013)
Excerpt 3

Teacher: [Previously named three major texts in unit] What were the likes and dislikes of the unit?

Deeej: That one was long and very boring.

Hannah: I liked it.

Teacher: Can you expand on that?

Faith: We read an article that says 50 Shades of Gay?

Teacher: No it’s a speech.

Deeej: No we watched a video, of 50 Shades of Gay.

Faith: Oh

Hannah: Yeah, 50 Shades of Gay

Ariel: Yeah I liked that

Deeej: She didn’t really explain the shades of gay, she was just like there’s 50 shades of gay and she only explained one shade.

Teacher: No she didn’t.

Hannah: No she didn’t.

Teacher: That’s what she was saying that she was like if you have one homosexual experience, where does that put you on the continuum. If you have two heterosexual experiences

Deeej: Wouldn’t that make you like a kind of a whore, and like you know kind of like alright if you’re like having multiple sexual experiences you’re a gay whore but it’s like-you’re a gay whore.

(Group two, Sexuality Unit Interview, May 21, 2013)

One of the major critiques of this video by students was that it was too long and boring, which resulted in many students not paying attention and comprehending the intended message. Excerpts one and three demonstrate how one person in each group
had to explain and clarify Wright’s intentions to another group member. For example, in the third excerpt Deeje correlated sexuality with sexual experiences and was unable to interpret Wright’s message connecting sexual orientation and discrimination. Although my objective was to keep all students engaged with the video, it was clearly unsuccessful for some students while others enjoyed and engaged with it, understood the significance and implications of its message, and used the video to engage in discussion. For example, Ansley noted that, although she was accepting of LGBTQ individuals, the video incited her to feel “proud” of the main character for identifying herself that way, which indicated that she has seen few positive portrayals of LGBTQ individuals, another deliberate reason I hoped the students would engage with the video and reflect about its contents.

**Intentionally-Developed Instructional Strategies**

Throughout the study, multiple data sources indicated that several instructional tools engaged the students ultimately leading them to further growth. These data are critical to this study as they help me understand how, as an educator, I can be most effective in the work to help students complicate naturalized beliefs that lead to prejudice. The intentionally-developed instructional strategies that led to engagement and that seemed to ultimately impact student learning were: explicit instruction, creating opportunities for peer discussion, and helping students develop an inquiry lens.

**Explicit instruction.** I purposefully chose explicit instruction as an instructional strategy used to answer student questions, expand students’ current knowledge, and to clarify critical concepts in order to engage students in the curriculum. Explicit instruction facilitated students’ comprehension of content and creation of new meaning, which
promoted their engagement. In the following excerpt, I was discussing three commercials produced by GLSEN. In the context of the discussion, I used explicit instruction in response to Greg’s inquiry into the negative impact of the commercials on LGBTQ youth (discussed in detail in upcoming sections):

Yeah there is a lot of research that actually especially like teenagers that there's like a backlash of people because homosexuals are more visible like in the media and you know anything like that that teenagers are actually paying the price or there there's actually more like violence and bullying towards you know even even straight kids that are just like perceived like you know especially boys that are more effeminate and things like that. So yeah you're right it could have a reverse effect. That's a good point. What were some of your thoughts?

Because I had immersed myself in current research about sexual orientation and schools (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Kosciw, 2010) and ongoing debates about LGBTQ topics (Licata, 1981; Shaw, 2005), I was able to scaffold Greg’s learning through explicit instruction by providing information about the topic. By expanding on Greg’s comment with current research, Greg connected to the content and created new meaning from the text maintaining his engagement in the discussion. In the next excerpt, the whole class discussed the terms male, female, masculine, feminine, biological sex, and gender, part of the Gender Terms Activity (Appendix G), and I used explicit instruction to describe the process of constructing a critical lens with students engaging them in the process of making connections with the current activity and future activities:

Teacher: So that I think that getting at masculine and feminine it really starts getting at the stereotypes that we assign to gender roles, right? That men are you know, cocky they're tough we have attitude, we're athletic, muscular. Whereas I mean I know plenty of women that
are into cars and dirt and you know are hard workers and are athletic but they're not necessarily considered masculine. And you know I know plenty of men are nurturing and responsible and caring and emotional but they're not necessarily feminine. And so I think that getting at those words really start looking at them critically which is what I want to start doing. And really just looking at them with a critical eye. Looking at the stereotypes that we have and try to take a more objective view and as we like go through this unit and just try to be aware of the words the words themselves, masculine feminine, male female, how we use them. And then what they're being assigned to. Like Zack was saying like we use this word and I don't I don't necessarily correlate it to being feminine. But when you actually think about how it's being used it really was being correlate it to women being Weak and men being strong. And so think about how we use’ those words. Because that's going to be the last challenge where we collect those words about masculine and feminine, men and female so that'll be really helpful to start thinking about those. And so let's talk about gender.

This excerpt portrays how I explicitly summarized the key points the students made when discussing the terms, “masculine” and “feminine” and contested those terms by contradicting the stereotypes that we unveiled as a class. I used explicit instruction to explained and summarize the process of uncovering normalized messages. I did this to encourage their metacognition and critical analysis. I was able to guide the discussion/instruct explicitly in this instance by drawing on my understandings from the fields of gender and sexuality suggesting that individuals experience sexuality on a continuum, not a dichotomy of heterosexual and homosexual (Green, 2012; Wright, 2013) and that individuals express gender through outward expressions of dress and behaviors that may contradict normalized societal views of masculine and feminine (Pascoe, 2007).

Creating opportunities for peer discussion. I found that peer discussion, an intentional instructional strategy used throughout the semester, was essential to engaging
students in considering multiple viewpoints as they discussed complicated social issues to broaden their individual perspectives. Our discussions included whole class and small group text-based discussions and Socratic Seminars (see explanation in Chapter III). The students expressed their views repeatedly about the importance of peer discussion across these discussion practices in supporting their understanding about how others feel, think, and believe. For example, Noah described the value of considering other people’s opinions in her end of year survey, saying that “small group and whole class discussions made me realize how others feel.” Noah identified the importance of understanding others’ feelings as inextricably linked to an individual’s beliefs. Her comment highlights that she had opportunities to consider perspectives different from her own in the context of peer discussion, which was a consistent finding in the data. Zumbob expanded on the effectiveness of peer discussion with regard to his developing personal views in reflections written after the gender unit: “The class discussions made me open up my mind.” Zumbob noted that exposure to a variety of different perspectives from his peers in discussions led him to be to be more open-minded. In much the same way, the next two excerpts from Deeej and Faith reveal further student perceptions about the importance of peer discussion in challenging and expanding their own personal views:

Excerpt 1

I guess like all of the discussions instill kind of like in the discussions and like not really the readings cause it’s so much to read but like the class discussions and [indistinct] kind of like I don't know gave me a little open mind perspective and not be so close minded and think a little bit more about like how hard their life was.

(May 21, 2013, Sexuality Unit Interview, Deeej)
Excerpt 2

I guess just like seeing different people’s opinions of it and just like kinda like thinking there's not really a right or wrong answer it's just based on what you believe. And it doesn't mean that you're wrong, right. I dunno.

(April 18, 2013, Gender Interview, Faith)

In these excerpts, Deeej and Faith expressed how they learned from their peers through class discussions, which maintained their engagement because of the constant interaction between students with the content. Deeej’s response indicated that the power of discussion for him was that it made his peers’ opinions accessible, which in turn broadened his perspective. Faith’s response illustrated her new understanding of the malleable and unstable nature of knowledge and beliefs.

Although students noted the value of discussion as an effective instructional tool that led to changes in their perspectives and maintained engagement, as the researcher and teacher, I believe the impact of discussion would have been less effective if it had not been embedded in an intentionally-constructed environment and intentionally-constructed curriculum-developed through my careful study of research and resources-that allowed students to learn with and from each other and provided resources to focus and provide information to ground the students’ conversations. However, the significance of this particular finding is that, from the students’ points of view, they needed to hear various perspectives from their peers not just from a video, an article, or me. I exposed students to a variety of opinions through texts, but the excerpts illustrate how dialogue amongst their peers appeared to be crucial in sustaining their engagement and causing them to be critically reflective.
Developing an Inquiry Lens

Although students indicated that the collection of instructional tools (small group text-based discussions and Socratic Seminars) were effective strategies in engaging them and altering their perceptions, I believe students’ ideas became less rigid because I encouraged them to develop and use an inquiry lens as integrated in their discussions. Data upon data revealed that, when students were guided to use an inquiry lens to discuss topics and texts, they increased knowledge or expanded and challenged tentative beliefs, ideas, concepts and opinions. This process seemed to keep them engaged throughout discussions and activities. Two types of teacher-constructed approaches seemed to be most effective in engaging students as inquirers: a fixed inquiry approach and an open inquiry approach. *Fixed inquiry* refers to highly structured tasks that required students to answer specific content-building questions, create a product that developed important concepts of the curriculum, or complete a teacher assigned task requiring a particular formula. *Open inquiry* resulted from loosely structured tasks that allowed students to use their own questions, responses, and queries to approach teacher-chosen texts.

In order to understand how students explored topics and inquiries, it was necessary to understand the inquiry levels that many students’ progressed through. When I looked across the dialogue transcripts, I coded inquiry processes as they fell along a continuum in non-linear ways. That continuum is reflected in what I call an Inquiry Pyramid (Figure 4.2) which illustrates the inquiry levels that many students progressed through (albeit moving up and down within the model throughout the experience) during discussions.
I constructed this graphic to illustrate the multiple inquiry responses that students and I used throughout dialogic sessions, responses which ranged from lower cognitive skills like directing and reading; increasing to higher cognitive skills like probing and exploring contradictions. Although I was not a direct participant in all of the small group discussions (when I was conversing with other students), I was an integral component in the students’ inquiry because I had modeled an inquiry stance at other times (in whole group and other small group conversations). In that way, my decisions and actions were instrumental in moving them forward in the inquiry levels that are part of the pyramid. Table 3.7, which contains the coding for transcripts, defines and provides examples for each inquiry level process.

Both fixed and open inquiries required students to take an inquiry stance, which Lindfors (1999) describes as "an orientation toward partner and topic that is uncertain and invitational" (p. 106). In other words, through inquiry the students were able to explore and thereby learn about the concepts, topics, and their own beliefs by taking risks to engage with others and invite others’ engagement. According to this definition, in this
study, most students were engaged in a constant state of inquiry as they read, responded, and talked about the texts in the social justice units.

**Fixed inquiry.** I used fixed inquiry as a strategy to engage students in developing content knowledge. On some occasions, I wanted them to uncover entrenched or hidden meanings in concepts, and felt that a structured task would support them. For example, I engaged the students in group one in an activity I titled “Learning Gender” (Appendix I). I gave them a list of questions to guide their small group discussions about the concept of socially constructed gendered identities, and then they were required to produce a visual representation, based on their lived experiences, of the process of how gendered identities are created. This excerpt portrays students’ engagement in developing their content knowledge about gender construction through this fixed inquiry activity:

Noah: What can girls do or boys do in your household that like

Vadasz: Oh I could do whatever.

Zumbob: I feel like boys were allowed to play in the dirt more and girls usually like kept in.

Vadasz: It wasn't like that for me

Zumbob: But well you're an only child so you got to do whatever you wanted to.

Noah: I dunno I can't think of anything right now. My head hurts.

Zumbob: Me neither I can't really like think

Vadasz: Well, I could if I wanted to I could go ride four wheelers with Daddy and get all dirty but then when I came inside probably Mom wanted to do my hair or something then she would. Like I was kinda like a tomboy that like could get I

Noah: Like dirty, down and dirty!

Vadasz: Like a tomboy that liked to dress up.
In this excerpt, the students explored how gender was constructed in their own lives, constantly negotiating their conceptions through dialogue with each other. The example also illustrates how these students’ engagement was maintained through the use of structured questions (fixed inquiry) to facilitate their discussion. At one point, when Noah was off task when she was talking about not feeling well, Vadasz drew her into the conversation by continuing to answer the question to complete the assigned task, at which point Noah rejoined the conversation connecting (humorously) to Vadasz’s response.

**Open inquiry.** Open inquiry is another strategy I used to facilitate students’ engagement and progression into the higher levels of the inquiry pyramid - to press students beyond surface level analyses of concepts or texts. The following excerpts provide examples of our moves through inquiry levels as we engaged in a discussion about an article titled “Lucky Boy” (2012). The article is about a boy whose parents attempted to raise him in a “gender neutral” environment. In this excerpt, the students and I probed, clarified, and explored contradictions, simultaneously gaining deeper insights into gender construction:

Vadasz: I would never let my son play with dolls.
Teacher: Why?
Zumbob: Never.
Vadasz: Because I feel like you're kinda setting him up to get picked on when he gets older because when he gets into like first grade or kindergarten and he wants to play in like the kitchen section instead of like the car section in the kindergarten room or whatever and then I thought like the other kids are goin’ to pick on him and he's not going to know how to cope with it because he grew up thinking it was okay.
Noah: What’d you say?
Greg: He's a male that plays with dolls? Not made for them

Vadasz: But I kinda feel like it's stereotypical because in my head I'm a girl and I play with cars. Then I think it's okay

Teacher: So but what does that tell you about stereotypes? I mean the stereotype that we have for males and females?

Vadasz: Well I feel like it’s really unacceptable for a guy to like play with dolls but its kinda acceptable for a girl to play with ok I don’t know balls or like-you know like

Teacher: Yeah-

Zumbob: Football

Teacher: Like athletics things that are stereotypical for

Greg: I don't even like thinking about it. Girls can wear boys clothes you know you don't really look at em any different but if you see’ a boy wearing

Zumbob: yeah-I mean that's kinda awkward. You wearing a-If you see a guy wearing a dress, I mean, pretty sure -I don't know if he's going to get in trouble for it but it's just someone’s going to look at him different. But you can see you know girls wearing basketball shorts you know sweats, whatever.

Teacher: Right.

Noah: But like when it comes to like men if they like started to act any way feminine then they automatically like then its automatically a problem in society, people start to judge them.

The excerpt above begins as Vadasz established her resistance to the redefining of gender norms in the context of the article. In other words, she clarified her stance. Then Zumbob and Greg offered their support for her opinion. A contradiction occurred when Vadasz identified a discrepancy between her thoughts and feelings. When students explored contradictions they asked questions, made statements, and gave examples that exposed their feelings about topics that did not logically coincide with other’s opinions,
texts, or experiences. In other discussions, contradictions were not always delved into (usually depending on the maturity or readiness of the group) but in this case, I was a contributor to the group and facilitated further probing into the topic by asking Vadasz to reflect on her response. Then the discussion moved into complicating the double standards of gender stereotypes by Zumbob and Greg followed by probing Noah about the stereotypes she suggested.

In this way, many students engaged as open inquirers through probing, clarifying, and exploring contradictions, all higher inquiry level behaviors. The students often worked through different levels of inquiry during even short segments of conversation as the discussion moved beyond regurgitation of students’ beliefs and engaged them in discussions using multiple perspectives and thereby expanding their conceptions. In their back-and-forth movement within a continuum of inquiry, they engaged in and out of critical dialogue supported by intentional instruction used to engage them and deepen their understanding.

**Impact on Becoming**

The second phase in my Cycle of Transformation in Social Justice Education (CTSJE) model is *Becoming*. I borrowed this language from Blackburn (2012) because it offers an analogy that helps to define this section of analysis:

I use it [be(come)ing] deliberately to draw attention to how the two, both becoming and being are infinitely reciprocal. It is not chronological as ‘becoming and being’ suggests. Just as an LGBTQQ person does not get to come out once and for all but must come out over and over again to different people at different times in different places and in different ways, an ally cannot be an ally
by a single declaration. It is not as if one declares one's self an ally and then relaxes in self-congratulations. Instead, an ally must perform being an ally repeatedly, and what an ally performance looks like in one space, perhaps at home, is different than it is in another, say, at school. Moreover, what one LGBTQQ person experiences as support is different than what another might experience as support. Learning what these infinite ally performances might look like is an endless process. One must constantly work on becoming an ally in order to be one at all. (p. 61-62)

Through their experiences in my class, students confronted issues of power, privilege, and oppression and navigated challenges to their identities, beliefs, and attitudes as a part of their process of Becoming. As some students felt discomfort with the material or concepts that we studied together, it was important to me, like Blackburn (2012), that they understood that this kind of learning was constant, required on-going reflection and often confrontation with prior beliefs, had no simple answers, and was a part of the process of Becoming.

Because I anticipated that most students would encounter a sense of dissonance and tension in a social justice curriculum, I intentionally developed a classroom environment, curriculum, and instructional strategies that would support and allow students to confront and hopefully interrogate their understandings and beliefs. Bell and Griffin (2007) explained:

Such feelings are an inevitable and ultimately helpful part of the learning process. Through engaging with challenging information and participating in experiential
activities, participants are encouraged to let go of the comfortable and familiar and explore new territory. (p. 74)

I recognized that tensions involved in such self-examination can often drive the learning process – the process of Becoming. Many students experienced tension during the confrontation of their unacknowledged assumptions about the concepts under examination. Students and I experienced dissonance and acknowledged discomfort, which was necessary in order to move forward. Griffin and Oullett (2007) agreed:

Having one's worldview challenged, and being asked to acknowledge unasked for privilege or understand how one is discriminated against, are painful and uncomfortable experiences. Helping participants understand dissonant feelings and learn from them is a vital part of social justice education. (p. 107)

In this section, I address how students were in the process of becoming someone else by living through and growing from the kinds of painful and uncomfortable experiences that Griffin and Oullett describe. The social justice curriculum I created positioned the students as critical inquirers in ways that often caused them to negotiate their own feelings and beliefs as they considered information that sometimes contradicted their worldviews. During this process, students began to: develop a critical eye; uncover messages about gender, sexuality and stereotypes, and origins of beliefs; grapple with contradictions; consider their own roles in perpetuating systems of oppression and privilege; and understand the complexity of LGBTQQ issues. My teacher-learner positionality enhanced my own growth as I challenged some of my own views along with students during the Becoming process.
Developing a Critical Eye

Data repeatedly show students developing and employing a critical lens to dismantle texts as they began to understand how power, privilege, bias, and oppression operate in texts. Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) delineate four components of critical social practices that teachers and students employ as they develop a critical eye. I used those components to guide the analysis of data presented below. They are:

- **Disrupting the Commonplace:** What systems of meaning are operating? How do discourses and texts work?
- **Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints:** Which voices are heard and absent? How can we make difference visible and create counter narratives?
- **Focusing on the Sociopolitical:** How do privilege, power, and injustice impact our daily life?
- **Taking Action to Promote Social Justice:** How do we use literacy to transform inequities and our own complicity in domination?

(p. xxv-xxvi)

Many students in this study and I applied and engaged in these critical social practices. I see them as elements in their/our processes of *Becoming* as we used a critical eye to examine and confront assumptions about the topics we studied.

**Disrupting the commonplace.** Many students in this study engaged in a critical social practice that challenged the neutrality of texts through critical analysis. This finding affirms the work of Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) who assert that “it is important to understand that someone is always attempting to position us in a specific way. We can follow along docilely, or we can bring up other perspectives and challenge
what is being presented” (p. 78). Disrupting the commonplace of a text requires students to determine how an author positions a reader or viewer and then examine the views that are normalized within the text. In the following excerpt, Vadasz disrupted the commonplace by identifying the intent of the video producers in her analysis of three commercials published by GLSEN to reduce the use of the phrase “that’s so gay”:

The fact that they used celebrities probably like made teenagers pay attention a little more to the ad, it wasn't just like a random. And it was kind of funny, if it wasn't funny then I think it wouldn't have as good of a meaning.

(May, 7, 2013, Think Before You Speak Commercials (2013) discussion, Group one)

Vadasz challenged the neutrality – the commonplace-ness-of the text by ascertaining the intended message of the commercials, as well as identifying the testimonial strategy used by GLSEN and its effect on the target audience. Vadasz actively deconstructed the techniques used by a major corporation whose intentions were to change a targeted group’s behavior. She also identified the method used by the company because she recognized how she and other teenagers were positioned by it. Her views about the inundation of media in the lives of young people corroborates research conducted by the United States National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health suggesting that, “American youth devote more time to media than to any other waking activity, as much as one-third of each day” (Health, 2000). This demonstrates the necessity of students learning how to critically evaluate and, if necessary, challenge messages delivered through media. Like Vadasz in the excerpt above, many students in this study capably problematized media texts and hidden messages as a result of their engagement with
instructional strategies that facilitated critical analysis, causing them to disrupt the commonplace.

**Interrogating multiple viewpoints.** Another pattern in the data was that, through this experience, many students explored topics from various perspectives, broadening their individual views and expanding their content knowledge. The following excerpt is from a small group discussion with group one as they discussed and examined three commercials produced by (GLSEN) that discourage people from using the phrase “that’s so gay.” This excerpt highlights Greg’s consideration of perspectives outside the intended heterosexual teenage audience:

Greg: Alright, I put could these commercials hurt gay people in a way?
Teacher: Could the commercials hurt gay people in a way?
Greg: In a way?
Teacher: What were you thinking?
Greg: I was thinking like it make them feel pressure to come out maybe.

(May, 7, 2013, *Think Before You Speak Commercials* (2013) discussion, Group one)

The commercials discussed in this excerpt target a heterosexual teenage audience who use the term “that’s so gay.” Greg wondered if the commercials could create pressure for teenagers to make their LGBTQ identities public in ways that would “hurt” them. Greg’s attempt to consider the commercial from the perspective of someone who was gay or lesbian allowed him to question the commercial’s illusion of neutrality and to suggest that GLSEN’s intent could be misconstrued, possibly leading to victimization. Greg also questioned how a powerful group like GLSEN could potentially make LGBTQ individuals targets instead of alleviating oppression. Initially I was surprised by Greg’s
perspective because I had not considered it, but I tried to respond in ways that would not close down further reflection by substantiating Greg’s analysis with my knowledge of victimization that many LGBTQ teenagers experience in school (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Ryan, 2003). In the process, Greg built his individual knowledge about sexuality and language in society, simultaneously expanding my own thinking as we examined the commercial an alternative perspective that challenged the neutrality of the text.

**Using a sociopolitical lens.** This study was grounded in the belief that all lenses used to perceive and describe the world are sociopolitical even without our recognition or acknowledgment of it. We advocate for a particular stance in our words and actions and also through our inactions. In this study, many students began to deconstruct the sociopolitical nature texts we explored and the assumptions embedded in their worlds. Through our discussions, supported by my direct instruction and specific readings and other texts, they began to take into account the social and political contexts in which texts were constructed, how those contexts influence texts and affect responses to them. For many students, this influenced their processes of *Becoming*. For example, in a Socratic Seminar on sexuality in which the whole class participated, Ansley challenged the normalized view of equality that many of her classmates shared during the discussion. Because students often fail to recognize how social and political factors impact their relationships with topics they discuss, this excerpt provides an important example of how Ansley, through this experience, was able to elucidate the social and political factors that shaped her classmates’ opinions:

> Everyone is like so far- so far the ways they should be accepted and things they shouldn't do like that but I think that not only should they be able do those things
and be like equal to others they should also be treated better like accepted and to
society rather than saying that, ok we'll let you be who you are but you have strict
rules and things you have to be like, they should be accepted and like he said
shouldn't be recognized as something different should just be like people.

(May, 20, 2013, Sexuality Socratic Seminar, Whole Class)

Using a sociopolitical lens, Ansley challenged subtleties in the oppression of LGBTQ youth by considering how equality needs to go beyond legal treatment of equality (political) and suggesting that the fabric of American society has to change in order to normalize homosexuality (social). Ansley also pointed out how the other students in class missed the underlying problem at hand explaining, in addition to legal changes, the importance of addressing inequality that causes socially created oppression. Ansley underscored how heterosexual privilege in our society continues to permeate how students view LGBTQ people, contradicting other students’ previously expressed views about equality. Ansley’s critical response to her views about classmates’ perspectives emphasizes how she used a sociopolitical lens to consider the impact of society’s treatment of LGBTQ individuals and contested other students’ responses to LGBTQ equality.

In another example, Zumbob used a sociopolitical lens to scrutinize how society, in its efforts to recognize the persecution of LGBTQ youth in modern society, undercuts attempts at achieving equality. Following a brief discussion about our school’s Gay-Straight Alliance, he said:
What I don't understand is that we have all these things like the Day of Silence and all this and gay parades. I mean we're trying to be equal but we have all these things that are kinda separate us into categories.

(May, 21, 2013, Sexuality Interview, Group one)

Zumbob’s critical analysis described how attempts to decrease the marginalization of targeted communities could simultaneously increase segregation in our society. As in Ansley’s example, this data excerpt portrays a student’s use of a sociopolitical lens to develop his own and others’ understanding of entrenched beliefs in their own sociopolitical contexts. Although he did not consider that marginalized communities benefit from events that bring awareness to issues ignored by mainstream society, that would be the next step in his Becoming process as he develops his sociopolitical lens from identifying how social and political factors impact everything we do, to becoming aware of using a sociopolitical lens.

Several students exhibited their growing ability to use a critical eye by analyzing how varying sociopolitical contexts shaped their understanding of power which, in turn, deepened their personal conceptualizations. Because of the instruction delivered throughout the course, many students were attentive to the concept of power and how it permeates our daily lives, including the texts we read. For example, in a small group discussion of the article “Lucky Boy” (2012), students in group one critically dissected gender regulation using power as a guiding construct, intensifying their individual and groups understanding of power:

Teacher: Why do we police it [gender expectations] so harshly for boys?

Noah: Because I feel like they hold more like power in society and stuff so like once you start to like degrade that and go down to like
women like feminine type thing’ then its like oh you're being like less, i don't know how to explain it.

Vadasz: If you were born a guy why would you want to be any different when its kinda how I feel like when other people because I feel sometimes girls wanna be like want the power that guys have but the guy already has that power why would they want to

Zumbob: Step down.

Vadasz: Yeah step down from that power?

(March, 25, 2013, “Lucky Boy” Article Discussion, Group one)

This excerpt raised awareness for these group members of the often-subtle ways in which power operates in the social and political context of the society in which they live. Specifically, the often unquestioned and accepted powerful roles that are played by males and withheld from women and that form the basis for controlling gender expectations, were exposed by the students’ critical analysis, increasing their understanding about how power functions in a male-dominated society.

I believe that students developed the ability to examine issues of power because of intentionally-created instruction as well as opportunities to practice critical analysis – using a critical eye - to examine texts, their lives, and society. The examples I have provided in this section are representative of many students’ use of these critical social practices and corresponds to Freirien (1970) theory, in which students name their worlds in order to confront oppression.

Uncovering Messages about Gender, Sexuality, and Stereotypes

As the students used a sociopolitical lens and confronted issues of power, they uncovered many hidden norms, views, and expectations that permeated the texts they studied. Simultaneously, they expanded and deepened content knowledge, personal
beliefs, and illuminated oppressive social practices/messages about gender, sexuality, and stereotypes that had unconsciously become part of their belief system. This finding is important because acknowledging unconscious messages is crucial to moving students forward in *Becoming* and *Transforming*.

**Uncovering rigid gender and sexuality biases.** Through our class experiences, students began to name and better understand biases related to conventional ways of expressing gender and ways that sexuality functions, a vital step toward awareness of how knowledge or lack of knowledge about gender and sexual conformity shape beliefs and influence actions. The following examples show how students sometimes realized they had rigid ideas about gender and sexuality and, through critical reflection, eventually altered them while other students sometimes recognized their rigid views but maintained those convictions. For example, in Zumbob’s response to the article “Lucky Boy” (2012), he asserted his conviction that boys and girls should follow traditional gender roles: “I would not let my son play with Barbie. My son would NOT wear girl clothes. I feel like you should be the gender you’re born into.” Zumbob described society’s established approach to gender requiring children to adhere to strict conventions about what constitutes feminine and masculine dress and activities. This response occurred in the first week of the gender unit, but he continued to regard gender as static throughout the semester. While our group discussions throughout the semester assisted him in becoming conscious of gendered stereotypes, they did not alter his beliefs.

In another example of class discussions revealing rigid definitions of masculine and feminine enactments of gender came from the last small group discussion in the sexuality unit. Group one was discussing a speech called *50 Shades of Gay* (2012).
Through their discussion, Vadasz and Zumbob again revealed their expectations that individuals should conform to traditionally masculine or feminine ways of enacting gender:

Vadasz: Yeah, I don't like how she changes her mind whether she wants to be a boy or a girl all the time and I don't like how she changes who she wants to be with and who she wants to be with based on the person. I think you should have to pick. Also I don't understand how she looked for so long without her teachers or anyone knowing because don't you have to fill out a piece of paper and doesn't it ask if you're a boy or a girl? And don't you have to be honest?

Zumbob: I mean did you not see her?

Vadasz: Have you done that here?

Zumbob: She looked like a little boy

In this way, our discussions about gender and sexuality encouraged students to verbalize their views about gender and sexuality norms. At the same time, the students were also involved in drama activities which further revealed unquestioned ways in which they viewed gender in conjunction with sexuality. The dramatic activities involved the students in developing improvisation and presentation skills. Through dramatic activities, some students displayed their beliefs about sexuality as fixed—either homosexual or heterosexual—rather than understanding sexual orientation as experienced on a continuum. For example, in February, two students from group one performed a role-play and through it they demonstrated three beliefs: (a) how gender displays are fixed and conventional, (b) how sexuality is binary, and (c) how these rigid gender and sexuality roles permeate students’ actions without their conscious awareness. I recorded the following in my journal:
During an activity yesterday called PLEASE, students had to convince their partner of something. I gave them the first scenario and then they had to practice using one of their choosing. Zumbob and Vadasz were partners and they chose for Zumbob to convince Vadasz that he was a girl. He used an effeminate voice and said that his parents wanted a boy but he came out with girl parts and so they just dressed him like a boy and put him on steroids and that is why he is bulky and has facial hair. He said he changed his mind and now wants to be a girl and said now they can go shopping and he is going to start wearing dresses and growing out his hair. Vadasz asked if he still liked girls and he said he was confused about that (which got a laugh out of the students) and he said because he was male for so long he still likes girls and Vadasz said, oh so you’re gay, and he said yeah I guess (another laugh from the students). In the end she said she believed him and they were done.

In this role-play, the two students communicated their view that females and males have distinct physical features (voice, hair, body composition) and interests (shopping), reinforcing conventionally predictable and static feminine and masculine characteristics. Vadasz also shared her belief in the binary conception of sexuality as heterosexual or homosexual, but did not recognize the variety of ways in which people identify themselves. In addition, the students in this role-play enacted gender and sexuality expectations without cognizance of the rigid roles they were reinforcing. Vadasz confirmed this view in the sexuality unit interview, “I think that if you're gay you're gay if you're straight you're straight, I don't think you should be able to go back and forth by how you feel in the day. And if you're a boy you're a boy if you’re a girl
you're a girl.” Vadasz viewed sexuality as static, although that contradicts many conventional views that consider homosexuality a choice. Vadasz’s categorization of gender conformed to the traditional ways that society views gender, however, her burgeoning awareness of her beliefs eventually supported her transition into *Transforming* (discussed later).

**Uncovering stereotypes.** The uncovering of rigid beliefs about gender and sexuality roles also illuminates the students’ uncovering of gender and sexuality stereotypes. This is something that the students discussed and questioned throughout the course. One of the first activities in which the students engaged during the gender unit was called the Gender Terms Activity (Appendix G). The activity involved them in writing words on post-it notes to define the following terms: male, female, masculine, feminine, biological sex, and gender. After students wrote words on post-it notes, they placed them on large charts in front of the room. As I began reading the words, I recognized that students were relying on stereotypes to define the terms. For example, men are strong and play sports and women are clean and like shopping. In response, I suggested that we make a separate column for male/female stereotypes. In the excerpt below, the students re-categorized their stereotypes about gender, becoming conscious of how gender expectations had been a naturalized part of their belief system. We began with a discussion of the characteristic of “confidency,” which they used to mean confident and self-assured. This was originally under the male category, but, through further discussion, the students determined this to be a stereotype:

Teacher: Confidency?

Vadasz: What’s that even mean?
Teacher: Does anyone want to offer an explanation for confidency?

Lucifer: Basically guys are—they were thought of as doing what they can do anything, pretty much stereotype.

Teacher: Write it under stereotype. Ok let’s go to female-

BrittBritt: You forgot one

Teacher: What was it?

Noah: Tall, dark, and handsome

Lucifer: I’m very pale

Vadasz: Stereotypical


Lucifer: Stereotypical

Teacher: House cleaners.

Vadasz: Stereotypical

In this short excerpt, the students differentiated conceptions of gender by comparing their lived experience to common characteristics ascribed through societal expectations. In the process, they challenged stereotypes, and demonstrated growing awareness of how they automatically associated different aspects of gender with common stereotypes.

Gender stereotypes often underpinned the students’ perceptions about sexuality. They often presented these stereotypes as fact which seemed to be expressed unconsciously and unquestioned in their responses to texts. During the sexuality unit interview, for example, Zumbob divulged a personal experience when he had observed two men at a Waffle House; his discussion exposing his reliance on female and male stereotypes to determine an individual’s sexuality:
The first guy comes in and this guy is probably like maybe 5'6" and just straight up muscle. Huge muscle. And and then his boyfriend walks in and he's probably a good 6'2" and wearing this massive like fake ring and like fur coat and I'm just like what is this? This so confusing, what're you doing? Just kinda like-cause I wasn't expecting him to be gay because he's a big muscle head dude and then I see the boyfriend and it's like-

In this excerpt, Zumbob defined a common stereotype—that gay men are effeminate and not athletically built—and then questions it. The excerpt portrays how one student used his personal experience supported by our discussions and critical lens to begin to recognize the rigidity of his views and to question stereotypes. Many students in the study relied on similar conceptions about gender and sexuality, and through a variety of learning experiences, became conscious of how those ideas led them to believe in stereotypes.

**Uncovering Origins of Beliefs**

In conjunction with naming their beliefs and the messages about gender and sexuality that students received, the students also recognized where those messages originated. Recognizing the origin of their beliefs contributed to students’ attentiveness to how their beliefs gradually became naturalized/normalized without being questioned—an essential component of *Becoming*. The primary sources of belief that students identified were: school, religion, and home.

**Uncovering school.** Many of the students in this study identified the explicit and implicit messages communicated in school about gender and sexuality. In the process,
many began to develop an awareness of how their school experiences influenced their beliefs, often unnoticed.

**Explicit messages.** The participants in this study identified sex education as the primary place in school where they received explicit instruction about sex, sexuality, and gender. As freshmen, they took a mandatory class called *Leadership 21* (L21). Embedded in the class was a 14-day sex education unit in which students learned about the physical, emotional, social, and mental changes experienced during adolescence in addition to the reproductive systems of both males and females. The two explicit messages that I derived from the data as sent to the students via sex education instruction in school were: (a) sex education solely addresses biological sex, completely ignoring gender, and (b) heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexual relationship. The excerpt below illustrates the first message and comes from an interaction that took place following the coursework on gender. In an interview with group one following the sexuality unit I asked the students what type of instruction they had received about sexuality prior to this unit, which led to a discussion about instruction regarding biological sex and their new awareness of the omission of gender:

Teacher: What prior experiences have you had reading writing and talking about sexuality?

Noah: Just the different parts.

Vadasz: Your sex.

Teacher: Like biological.

Vadasz: Your sex, not your gender.

Teacher: Ok

Vadasz: Cause those are two different things.
Zumbob: Nothing about like transgender or anything like that.

The students in this excerpt exposed their newfound attentiveness to the exclusion of gender in their school experiences, but specifically in their sex education classes, making them aware of how school shapes their knowledge in specific ways.

Another explicit message discerned through data analysis was that the sex education instruction the students experienced in school portrayed heterosexual relationships as the only acceptable relationships. According to Rose, an L21 teacher at the school where this study took place, “By law we cannot discuss homosexuality unless it is in the context of transmission of STI’s and HIV” (personal communication, April 19, 2013). Parallel to this teacher’s account, the state’s Comprehensive Health Education Act (CHEA) mandates “health education classes may not include discussion of ‘alternate’ sexual lifestyles from heterosexual relationships.” This finding indicates that not only is a complete picture of sexuality disregarded, the State’s sex education program sent overt negative messages associating non-heterosexual relationships with sexually transmitted diseases and nothing else. The current CHEA policy was recently considered for revision by legislation, but according to an employee from the state’s Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy:

There was an effort this year in the Legislature to update the Comprehensive Health Education Act - the document that provides guidance for teaching sex education in South Carolina. Those efforts were not overly successful and to date there have been no changes made to the language. (personal communication, July 14, 2013)
Thus, the explicit message that students were inundated with through direct instruction in school was that heterosexuality is the only acceptable relationship. Revealing the explicit messages delivered through explicit instruction, allowed some students and myself to understand how instruction that takes place in school shapes their beliefs.

**Implicit messages.** Some students observed that silence - the absence of gender and sexuality instruction-was an implicit message about heteronormativity delivered in school. In the sexuality interview with group two, Faith pointed out the institutional silence regarding sexuality that she experienced in school, “Some people get offended about that kind of stuff or some people. Teachers do not like talking about it.” Faith was attentive to the uncomfortable stance that many of her teachers adopted. This finding affirms the work of Thein (2013) whose research demonstrated that teachers fear discussing LGBTQQ topics. In the same group interview, Lucifer supported Faith’s statement acknowledging the unspoken limitations placed on teachers: “You know many teachers don't bring it up cause it's not really their thing to bring up.” The students in this group interview noticed the silence, recognizing that their teachers did not engage in discussions regarding sexuality. This highlights their growing awareness of how school influences their concepts of sexuality inconspicuously.

**Uncovering religious messages.** Patterns in the data revealed that many students became cognizant about how their beliefs and others’ beliefs about gender and sexuality were directly impacted by religious messages. Although I did not ask students what their religious backgrounds were, many students identified as Christians, not specifically naming their denomination and one student identified as Atheist. Many students did not
seem to question the validity of religious messages while others did. Some students, for example, identified how religious beliefs regulate views about gender. During a small group discussion about an article titled “The Transgender Athlete” (Ridley, 2012), Greg asserted his belief about the role of a higher power in determining male and female gender roles: “I don't think people should be transsexual. I think everybody should be how God made us, man and women.” Greg’s response is an example of a pattern seen in other students whose religious beliefs guided their beliefs about gender and sexuality and often went unquestioned.

Another example of students’ reliance on uninterrogated religious messages occurred during the Socratic Seminar about sexuality on May 21, 2013. Talking about gay and lesbian couples, the following discussion ensued:

Ralph: They shouldn't be married.
Teacher: I mean do you have a like reason behind it, or?
Vadasz: Like religion.
Ralph: Just because they- yeah
Britt Britt: The Bible.
Ralph: Yea like they just shouldn't, like it's messed up. Like religious and just s'way everybody's done, one man and one woman. So they just shouldn't marry.

This data excerpt illustrates how some students relied on religious messages to validate their argument against same-sex marriage. They seemed to accept those messages without interrogation which was likely also a tenet of their religious beliefs (adopting a non-questioning, faith-based stance). In this way, many students correlated their strong Christian beliefs with their rejection of homosexuality and non-binary gender norms.
Important to their learned beliefs were that one does not question one’s faith or consider how religious messages might contradict other messages or beliefs they receive and hold.

**Questioning religious teachings.** In contrast, other students examined religious messages they received interpreting them in ways that were more consistent with their acceptance of LGBTQ individuals. In an interview with the ally group, for example, Ariel explained her views about the contradictory nature of strict, uninterrogated religious beliefs about sexuality revealing her own beliefs about sexuality mitigated by religious messages:

> I just don’t agree with like how a lot of people say because its against the Bible and stuff like that you don’t believe in it but the Bible says you know you shouldn’t put down anyone else and stuff like that and so. You know there are people out there who are Christians and stuff who say you know there’s nothing wrong with having like a gay marriage and stuff like that because I mean yeah like gay marriage and stuff should be like between God a woman and a man but you like the Bible and the like religion says don’t put down anyone else and so for people to be like so closed minded about stuff it’s just kind of dumb.

Although Ariel identified as a Christian (personal communication), she complicated the religious messages expressed by other students in the class with her own understanding of Christianity that posited acceptance over judgment.

**Uncovering home.** Students also recognized the influence of family and home life on their opinions and views about gender, sexuality, and sex which, in some cases, were automatically accepted and in others forcefully rejected. In a discussion on the article “Lucky Boy” (Roberts, 2012), some students articulated taken-for-granted ideas
they felt were conveyed through home and the unopposed ways that children accept the beliefs of their families:

Vadasz: I feel like if you grow up with gay parents then- like if you have a dad and a dad then and you're a boy then they're going to be okay with you playing with dolls. And if you have like a mom and a mom then they're probably going to be okay with you playing with cars or like if you’re a girl-

Teacher: Yeah but you don't have a mom and a mom and you are

Vadasz: No but I feel like it also kinda maybe if you’re an only child kind of thing because I was an only child until like two years ago so I grew up at the shop with Daddy and and like I didn't have an older sister to go shopping with or like or like an older brother to show me the things but so I stuck with my Dad so my Dad showed me the cars and that's why I think I like that more than like

Zumbob: You know I think it all really depends on your Parents. Who they are and how they feel you should grow up. so

In this way, some students made the assumption that if children lived with parents in a same-sex partnership, gender and sexuality expectations were more fluid than when living in households with heterosexual parents. In the excerpt above, Zumbob relegated the development of an individual’s feelings to the ideas and beliefs about gender and sexuality held by their parents.

Another example of this occurred during the Socratic Seminar on sexuality. Lucifer succinctly described the role of an individual’s family in forming beliefs about gender and sexuality when he said:

I'm going on the marriage thing. I think it's the way people have been taught, you know from religion or from like I was taught from a little kid you know marriage is a sacred vow between a man and women, nothing else. You know it's the way people have been brought up.
Lucifer pinpointed the power that familial bonds can have in forming an individual’s beliefs, often coinciding with religious beliefs held by the family.

Through our dialogue, many students also recognized assumptions they made about how other families’ beliefs influenced their offspring’s beliefs. For example, many students identified me as an LGBTQ ally and assumed that my children will probably feel the same way because that is the way that I raise them. Many students relied on the idea that a family’s beliefs controlled the child’s beliefs. Ansley corroborated this in the Socratic Seminar saying, “I feel like how like we’re brought up how it’s the way we are raised the way we practice and stuff.” Ansley noted the influence that families have on student beliefs and opinions alluding to the idea that those beliefs will vary depending on the parents’ views.

Contradicting family beliefs. Although many students derived their beliefs from their families, some students did not share their families’ beliefs, actively resisting the messages they received at home. The following data excerpts from ally group conversations, trace family and home influences about sexuality and the students’ resistance of those messages:

Excerpt 1

Lucifer: You know I was brought up in a very like closed-minded family, you know my family hated, hates that kind of stuff you know. And I’ve - as I’ve grown I’ve gotten to see everything, I’m very open minded about it. It’s very, I I’ve got no nothing against it.

Teacher: What do you think that made that change, coming from your family that’s closed minded to you being open minded?

Lucifer: My friends. My friends you know and just the people I’ve been around you know. I’ve grown up in a time where basically nothing’s like nothing’s really frowned upon by your peers you
know. I could go out and shave half of my head and I could come to school and my friends would be like, dude you know looks nice.

Excerpt 2

Ariel:

Family’s basic the same way when it comes to like gay like any kind of like anything to do with homosexuals and like interracial relationships and stuff. Just because they were brought up in like, like everyone in my family has been brought up in like the deep south and stuff like that. And just so like everything’s totally against it but the fact that like I mean when I was younger I of course like agreed with everything my family said but then I as I got older I learned to like see things differently and I think it was a lot because my dance director came out and he was married for five years but the thing was he grew up in a strong Christian family and then he came out and he still goes to church and everything else and still believes the Bible and everything. But, I mean, I he like isn’t any less religious than he was now and the fact that like his family still supports him and stuff has like, significantly, like changed my views and stuff just on like everything. Because I’d never really like been close with like a like gay person until him and my best friend came out. And so it just kinda like it changed your views a lot on things.

Ansley:

Me growing up my father is [indistinct] that he is extremely racist and extremely homophobic and my mom she has racist viewpoints but she's more open about it than my dad and she's more open about homosexuality than my dad is because her best friend's brother came out of the closet after being married. And so I just kinda grew up with that viewpoint of like my dad is so racist and he's always judging people and then my mom always like she judges people a lot too. I- and my sisters doing. She picked up after my dad, she does it. And with me when well always being like on stage and singing and stuff I’ve learned at a very young age that you're always going to be judged no matter where you go. But that doesn't make it ok. And it still hurts when people talk badly about you and it still makes you wanna cry so it’s just like I found out like just judging other people for their choices or how they are I feel like that's wrong to do and I don't want to be responsible for like, cause people do take like major stuff like people commit suicide for that kind of stuff. And I don't want to be that person who's that responsible for it cause I would die of guilt because it’s just horrible. And I feel like everyone just needs to be accepting because I mean it’s just I mean it might be in the bible from the south but it’s the 21st century and it’s time to kind of realize that this is our world and we just need to become accepting about it.
In these ways, ally group members identified how their home lives contradicted their current belief systems and they were able to explain how their beliefs had altered based on their lived experiences with friends and the influence of loved ones.

**Home messages about sex.** Sex was another topic related to messages from home. Students discovered that implicit messages from home controlled their behaviors and views about behaviors relating to sexual activity. During the April 8, 2013, Learning Gender activity (Appendix N), some students revealed their growing awareness about the messages about sex delivered from home at different ages:

Vadasz: When I was little I couldn't wrap my head around that. Well, I guess well I was innocent and so - Yeah but I was super innocent and didn't think that anything bad ever happened between boys and girls and so I didn't understand.

Zumbob: Yeah we learned lessons of how easily you can get pregnant as you got older. And that that's why parents trying to keep their kids kinda not isolated but separated from the opposite sex as much as they can.

Many students learned at an early age that they were not supposed to participate in certain activities with the opposite gender and discovered at a later age that it was because parents were afraid that they would engage in sexual acts. Students internalized the message from their parents that some interactions with the opposite gender were forbidden, and reinforced abstinence.

**Uncovering and Grappling with Contradictions**

An important pattern in the data (also mentioned in previous findings) was that, in the process of our engagements, many students often uncovered and began to reflect on their own conflicting assumptions about gender and sexuality, either exposing them to critique or accepting them as diametrically opposed ideas. For example, Zumbob’s
response to the article “The Transgender Athlete” (2012) emphasized the conflict between his belief in conventional gender conformity and his belief in everybody’s right to the pursuit of happiness: “I don’t really believe in being a transgender. But I do believe do what makes you happy. I kinda like how the NCAA is now allowing them to play.” In this one response, Zumbob struggled with not accepting transgender identities, which conflicted with his alternative belief that individuals should pursue happiness however they wish.

Greg also exposed his opposing views in multiple responses throughout the semester, but failed to acknowledge a disconnect between his beliefs. In his social justice portfolio completed on March 22, 2013, he reflected on his belief about equality: “I think that we are all American and should all be treated fair because we are American.” This statement contradicts his response to the article, “The Transgender Athlete” (2012) dismissing acceptance of gender nonconforming individuals: “I do not believe in any of this transsexual stuff” and in his reflection written at the end of the gender unit in which he vehemently opposed non-heterosexual relationships: “Yes I still feel the same about gay people should be wiped off the earth.” Although his beliefs about fairness were incompatible with his beliefs about gender and sexuality, Greg communicated exactly what his views were, and established a foundation on which to discuss those inconsistencies in his small group discussions.

While some students accepted their contradictory beliefs without being overtly troubled by the conflicts inherent in them, other students tentatively probed their diametrically opposed ideas allowing their group members or myself to identify or question a contradiction as we actively explored the contradiction together. The
following excerpt portrays a group of students exploring contradictions about gender and sexuality:

Vadasz: I feel like if you grow up with gay parents then - like if you have a dad and a dad then and you're a boy then they're going to be okay with you playing with dolls. And if you have like a mom and a mom then they're probably going to be okay with you playing with cars or like if your'e a girl

Teacher: Yeah but you don't have a mom and a mom and you are

Vadasz: No but I feel like it also kinda maybe if you're an only child kind of thing because I was an only child until like two years ago so I grew up at the shop with Daddy and like I didn't have an older sister to go shopping with or like or like an older brother to show me the things but so I stuck with my Dad so my Dad showed me the cars and that's why I think I like that more than like

Zumbob: You know I think it all really depends on your parents. Who they are and how they feel you should grow up-so

Teacher: Did you think that there's anything detrimental to a boy playing with a doll? I mean do you think that's going to make him gay? like the way that you phrase it kinda made it sound like that that's what would be the inevitable result of why you would let your kid - like I let my son play with a doll that means he's going to be gay.

Vadasz: No

Teacher: That means I'm gay because I let him play with a doll.

Vadasz: No

Teacher: You know what I mean?

Vadasz: But I feel like more than likely if there was a boy that played with dolls and a boy that didn't play with dolls I feel like if one of them was gonna be gay it’s probably gonna be the one who plays with dolls.

Noah: But why is that though? Like you get you don’t become gay by playing with dolls
Vadasz: I dunno. It's the more feminine thing and so maybe he's gonna turn out maybe not necessarily gay but he'll be more feminine.

(March 25, 2013, “Lucky Boy” (2012) article discussion, Group one)

This excerpt illustrates students confronting their fixed assumptions about gender roles.

Vadasz articulated her belief that females should play with dolls and males should not, but when I probed that belief with various questions, she verbalized the contradictions. She attempted to validate her belief by utilizing the common stereotype of homosexual men as feminine, but Noah problematized that stereotype and, in the process, exposed another contradiction - that masculinity and femininity do not determine sexuality. This discussion allowed the group to begin confronting fears that perpetuate gender and sexuality expectations, making the students in this group conscious of contradictions in their assumptions and beliefs that they had not previously recognized.

Another instance similarly illustrates students challenging – grappling with - beliefs embedded in their upbringing as those beliefs contradicted their lived experience:

Vadasz: Ok I don't think that I don't necessarily agree with it but I also don't understand how we do say that everyone is equal in America but we don't

Ariel: We don't.

Hannah: But we - we really don't.

Zumbob: But we don't really give anyone equal rights.

Teacher: Yeah.

Vadasz: You're only equal if you are

Hannah: White or a man.

Vadasz: Straight. Wear white. You're like a guy and you make money. Like that's about when you're equal, it's not actually what we say it is.

Zumbob: Straight, white, man.
In this excerpt, students tackled the paradox that undergirds many social inequalities that exist in American society. They recognized that many American societal messages proclaim that everybody is free and equal - particularly when propagated by institutions dominated by representatives of dominant culture groups - yet if an individual does not conform to the expectations of mainstream society (White, male, heterosexual, Christian),
they do not benefit from the same privileges as other people do. The students in this excerpt illustrate the tentative probing of complex and contradictory ideas that were woven into the fabric of their lived experience as a result of the experiences in my class. Although we did not discuss their conscious awareness of how these contradictions are an accepted part of their belief system, the process of revealing those contradictions was important to *Becoming*.

**Uncovering Their Own Roles in Perpetuating Systems of Oppression and Privilege**

While many students grappled with contradictions becoming acutely aware of their own inconsistencies, some students experienced intense emotional responses which seemed to be important in their process of *Becoming*. These emotions often stemmed from confronting their own roles in the perpetuation of systems of oppression and privilege. Many of the activities students engaged in provoked them to grapple with these roles as many of them identified with advantaged groups rather than targeted groups. This seemed to disturb their equilibrium regarding social injustice. This finding affirms Griffin and Oulett’s (2007) research that posits:

> An important part of the oppression equation is understanding that they benefit from oppression and that eliminating oppression requires that they acknowledge and give up their self-perceptions as neutral bystanders who can choose to help others or not" (p. 111).

Uncovering inconsistencies in their beliefs and revealing their privileged role in oppression was unsettling and overwhelming, and in some cases led to the expression of intense feelings described in the following sections.
Anger and resistance. Anger and resistance are strong emotional responses to a perceived act of provocation (Griffin and Ouellett, 2007), and some students responded to content and concepts that challenged their existing beliefs with anger and resistance. The example below is from an occasion when I worked with group one to discuss the speech, 50 Shades of Gay (2013). We were discussing how iO Tillet Wright, the storyteller, was born female, but for several years identified as male, and as an adolescent began to identify as a female whose appearance was a combination of stereotypically male and female characteristics, and who chose significant others based on the individual not gender. Zumbob resisted and expressed anger toward my instruction regarding how individuals identify in purposeful ways:

Greg: I was just wondering like would she be considered transsexual even though she doesn't think she is?
Vadasz: You are what you think you are. Isn’t that right, Ms. Lett?
Teacher: I mean it would be how she identifies, not how we identify her.
Zumbob: Oh god. Dumb. Hate when you say that it makes me so mad. Seriously. It’s how I identify myself, not how you identify me (sarcastic tone mocking the teacher’s words).

The bolded text illustrates Zumbob’s frustrated tone and resistance to the idea that individuals might identify themselves in purposeful rather than conventionally-defined ways; his mocking tone and raised voice level indicated his expression of irritation as anger. He communicated his anger in a school-appropriate way, but his abhorrence of the idea that responsibility for labeling gender and sexuality might be up to each individual (as opposed to being inherently biological and/or driven by static views of gender) was palpable. Zumbob was not the only student who experienced anger; Vadasz also disclosed her anger in her initial response to the “Lucky Boy” (2012) article:
I would not allow a little boy to play with dolls. My son will play with baseballs, footballs, or basketballs. *He won’t play dress up unless it is to look like his dad!* I feel like in some ways that that is setting him up to get picked on. You have to show them early on what is right and wrong for boys to do.

Vadasz resisted the notion that males and females did not have to adhere to mainstream societal views of masculinity and femininity, leading to her angry response. In these ways, Vadasz and Zumbob expressed their anger with concepts in the lesson that disrupted their accepted beliefs about how gender and sexuality should function in society.

**Absolving prejudiced views and transphobia.** Some students appeared to conceal their fears and biases by claiming that they did not want transgender persons to be physically hurt. Continuing to express transphobic views “the irrational fear of any nonnormative expression of gender” (Chase and Ressler, 2009, p. 24), they also expressed worry about the safety of transgendered persons as if in attempts to absolve themselves of prejudicial views but ignoring the other sources of pain that transphobia perpetuates, for example, social ostracism and unequal rights. One of many examples of this attempt at absolution occurred when we discussed the article, “The Transgender Athlete” (2012) with group one, the following dialogue exposed the students’ resistance to transgender identities and attempts to absolve their prejudice by stating they did not wish physical harm on other human beings:

**Excerpt 1**

Greg: I put that I don't believe in this transsexual stuff but it is wrong to physically hurt someone just because they are.

Teacher: What do you mean you don't believe in it?
Greg: I don't think people should do that. But I-I-I think it is wrong to just hurt somebody because they are.

Teacher: What do you mean they don't - they shouldn't do that?

Greg: I don't think people should be transsexual. I think everybody should be how god made us, man and women.

Teacher: So, so you don't think that even though they feel that way they should act on it?

Greg: No they should - they should, I dunno they should like a man and women, how it was made to be.

Excerpt 2

Zumbob: I said I'm not really for transgender kinda like I really I think that you’re born a man for a reason and that you know you have a place on this earth to be a man

Teacher: Mmmhmmm.

Zumbob: So I just I-I mean. I'm not gonna I'm not gonna pick on someone because they are transgender or beat them up or anything like that. I'm just, I'm not for it so

Both Greg and Zumbob exposed their discomfort toward people who do not conform to society’s definitions of gender, revealing their biases but, in a sort of conundrum with themselves, expressing concern that anyone would be physically harmed because of their gender orientation. Zumbob responded similarly in his end-of-year response to the prompt and question, “Describe any times/units/topics that made you uncomfortable.” Zumbob responded with, “transgender.” His brief response and the previous excerpt indicate his hidden fears and biases against transgender individuals which he attempted to obscure by explicit statements about not wanting to physically hurt a transgender person. However, Zumbob ultimately exposed his own loosely veiled belief that transgender individuals should not be harmed, when later contradicting his own statement saying:
If I go to a club or something, and I see there is really good looking woman and I take her back to my house and I found out it’s a dude. Am I allowed to, like beat them up, or is it still considered a woman?

Although I did not address Zumbob’s contradiction during the discussion, I believe that, because he revealed his emotions by developing a hypothetical scenario, he also laid a foundation from which he might eventually begin to recognize and grapple with his own contradictions.

Exposing students to recognition of their unconscious contradictions is an important step in the process of challenging the heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia that exists in many schools. This finding affirms the work of Rands (2009) who argues:

Because schools are rife with gender category oppression and gender transgression oppression, creating schools in which all students can flourish demands that teacher educators prepare teachers to challenge the gender oppression matrix in their classrooms, the broader school environment, and beyond. (p. 423)

The concealed prejudice, and transphobia, that some of the students experienced also set the stage for them to uncover the complexity underlying many other LGBTQQ issues.

Uncovering the Complexity of LGBTQQ and Gender Issues

Patterns in the data revealed that while students engaged with the curriculum in ways that caused them to complicate their understandings and become aware of discriminatory beliefs, there were some complex ideas about gender and LGBTQQ issues that remained undeveloped and unexamined. In particular those unexamined issues were:
misconceptions about what it means to be lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, or questioning; and heterosexual privilege.

**Misperceptions.** Throughout the study, students displayed a lack of knowledge about gender, gender identity, and sexuality. They navigated their unawareness by voicing curiosity - questioning me and others, sometimes revealing misconceptions. To illustrate the nature of many students’ misperceptions as they negotiated the complexities of LGBTQ identities, I excerpted comments from the primary group’s discussion on “The Transgender Athlete” (2012). The discussion portrays students’ curiosity and misperceptions about transgender bodies:

**Excerpt 1**

Greg: Does that make her grow men body parts?

Zumbob: It makes her-like-her boobs shrink.

Teacher: You can’t grow men body parts-but you can grow

Zumbob: Hair.

Teacher: Hair and muscle-yeah.

Zumbob: Pecs-groups.

**Excerpt 2**

Zumbob: Are hermaphrodites real?

Teacher: They don’t call them hermaphrodites anymore, they call them intersex.

Vadasz: What does that mean, how does that work.

Zumbob: Like what do you eat or

Vadasz: Yeah what do you?

Vadasz: I don’t really know, can we Google it?

Zumbob: Can you have babies or no?
Teacher: No.
Noah: You can’t.
Vadasz: That sucks.
Noah: Could you? Like artificial insemination-
Excerpt 3
Vadasz: But does it produce semen?
Zumbob: But you don’t have balls?
Greg: What do you do?
Noah: So you only have a pee-pee?

In this discussion about transgender individuals, the students fixated on the physical characteristics of individuals unlike themselves, apparently unabashed with their curiosity and confronting misunderstandings. Students conveyed fascination with the physical components of being transgender, which took up a significant part of our discussion. However, this kind of discussion ignored the social aspect of being transgender and the oppression that exists because of the lack of social acceptance. The discrepancy between students’ curiosity and erroneous beliefs about transgender individuals, illustrates an important element in the complexity and challenging work of conducting focused discussions about LGBTQ individuals. The bottom line was that an important missing element in their ability to discuss issues was simply, accurate information.

**Heterosexual privilege.** The majority of the students self-identified as heterosexual. While they generally acknowledged that, in American society, heterosexuality produces unearned privileges and while class activities supported their examination of the advantages they acquired by identifying as heterosexual, many
students simultaneously countered this view by alleging that under-represented or marginalized groups also have privileges or asserting that sexuality does not inhibit individuals’ lives. In the following excerpt taken from an interview following the sexuality unit, Vadasz indicated her beliefs about perceived privileges provided to LGBTQQ students as mitigating their heterosexual privilege as well as outwardly denying an individual’s self-identified sexuality:

Vadasz: Yeah but ok so I have a question. You know when one of—I can't remember if it was this year’ or if it was last year they were 'holding hands in the picture.

Teacher: I didn't even see the picture.

Vadasz: I'm pretty sure it was last year. But like two girls in the front were holding hands in the picture. But like if those are straight people that would not be allowed.

Vadasz observed what she perceived to be a double standard for heterosexual students versus LGBTQQ students’ treatment in the yearbook. Yet she failed to acknowledge the many other examples of privilege that heterosexuals possess, even though there were an abundance of examples in the yearbook alone, such as the election of prom king and prom queen.

In another example, Zumbob dismissed the identity of LGBTQQ students by suggesting that they were insincere in their sexual orientation. This demonstrated his heterosexual privilege because his underlying assumption was that, if an individual does not identify as heterosexual, their sexual orientation is not authentic or honestly expressed. In the sexuality unit interview, Zumbob commented, “Sometimes I feel that kids do it just for attention. And it's not even like they're really truly gay.” Zumbob’s comment and my observations led me to believe that Zumbob also did not recognize his
heterosexual privilege in this situation, which I assume is because he never had to “prove” his heterosexuality.

One glaringly obvious way that the heterosexual students showed their privilege was by objectifying the experience of transgender people portrayed in the excerpts above. This is consistent with the work of Catalano, McCarthy, and Shlasko (2007) who write that "participants can get caught up in the details of transgender experiences (which may not necessarily illustrate the experiences of oppression)" (p. 227). When the students in this study discussed the experiences of transgender people they focused on their physical bodies instead of exploring the oppression that society creates due to their outward expression of their gender. Their conversations ignored their heterosexual privilege, overly focused on physical attributes, and circumventing the purpose I had set forth for the discussion. Discussed in Chapter V, this speaks again to the need for direct instruction and providing information for students so they can learn about elements such as physical attributes and then move beyond that to focus on issues of justice.

Impact on Transformation

The third component of the Cycle of Transformation in Social Justice Education (CTSJE) model is Transforming, which I define as the kind of change that resulted in action. This process of change is different from the process that is Becoming. When I describe changes that occurred through the process of Becoming, I refer to the students’ initial conflicts, contradictions, and changes in the awareness, beliefs and views. As I discuss the process of Transformation, however, I focus more on taking action and I describe it along a continuum from awareness (building on insights gained through Becoming) to agency. Some students developed new awareness - which was a
transformation action in itself - but they did not develop a sense of agency in terms of taking direct action to affect other changes. Others positioned themselves as allies and became more aware of the issues that LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students face in schools and communities, recognizing heterosexual privilege and adopting a stance of agency toward changing their behavior. At the same time, still other students demonstrated little or no transformation, making minimal changes in their actions and continuing to perpetuate bias against LGBTQ and gender nonconforming individuals and/or perpetuating the stereotype of LGBTQ persons as victims. These students maintained what I termed, a position of stagnancy, a position in which they did not deviate from their original beliefs and were not willing to delve into other perspectives. Because the students’ transformation (or lack of transformation) fell largely into these categories, I organized the following section around the topics of awareness, agency, and stagnancy.

**Awareness**

Most of the students experienced some change in their awareness related to LGBTQ issues. Through careful analysis, I constructed two categories about the students’ awareness in terms of: (a) knowledge or basic information and (b) language or how language affects others.

**Knowledge.** Patterns in the data revealed many students acknowledged an increase in knowledge in terms of basic information related to issues of gender and sexuality, enabling them to confront misconceptions and contradictions in their own beliefs and the beliefs of others. For example, Greg’s reflection at the end of the gender unit portrays his growing awareness of LGBTQ individuals in society: “I just didn’t
know so many famous people were gay or lesbian.” This was an important piece of information for Greg’s personal development because it challenged the heteronormativity that shaped his beliefs that privileged heterosexuality and reduced tolerance for LGBTQQ individuals. Another example is Noah’s response to the article, “Lucky Boy” (2012), noting her new knowledge about how gender expectations are formed: “It makes you [think] about how and exactly gender works like not only is it in the genes but society conditions us to be a certain way.” Based on my observations and Noah’s responses, Noah’s new understanding about how society shapes and regulates gender was important because she expressed herself through dress in stereotypically masculine ways. This led me to believe that she was, therefore, acknowledging how society’s subtle messages of reified gender roles helped her to make sense of her own identity. Noah’s response indicates her burgeoning awareness of how society controls gender expectations, and how society shaped her identity, by resisting gender expectations.

The next three excerpts also illustrate many students’ broadened knowledge pertaining to a new understanding of gender and sexuality. While their conceptual understandings fell along a continuum, the following excerpts are small portraits of students confronting their previous beliefs through newly acquired knowledge:

Excerpt 1

Noah: I didn't feel like - there was any change but I felt like it just opened my eyes and like made me realize some stuff I guess - just the like the different what is it gender identity gender whatever and all - I didn't know there's as many like athletes that were transgender. That kinda blew my mind there.

(April 18, 2013, Gender Unit Interview, Group one)
Excerpt 2

Ariel: [I thought it] was interesting how like she was like you're not completely straight or gay or whatever. Like understand like that's her choice [indistinct].

(May 13, 2013, 50 Shades of Gay (2012) discussion, Group two)

Excerpt 3

Vadasz: I never realized how many different things you can be. Like you can like you're not just homosexual or heterosexual you're like that and then you're either a boy and a girl in your head and then you're a boy and girl in your sex or female or male in your sex and then who you wanna like who you're attracted to and then who you're sex or who you're romantically attracted to and who you're sexually attracted to are two different things.

(April 15, 2013, “The Transgender Athlete” (2012) discussion, Group one)

The excerpts in this section are examples of the ways that students used knowledge gained from the gender and sexuality units to challenge their own views of gender and sexuality. Their new knowledge was one way that they experienced change; by becoming aware of their increased knowledge of gender and LGBTQ issues.

Language and intent. Another pattern in the data was that many students acknowledged a change in their awareness of how the language they used was hurtful and/or derogatory. One example is Zumbob’s response to the Think B4 You Speak commercials (2008). Reflecting on the terminology “that’s so gay,” he wrote: “This makes me think about all the stories of hurtful things I’ve said. This is really a serious matter. It really hurts other people.” Zumbob’s new awareness challenged him to think about how the language he used, specifically derogatory phrases about LGBTQ people, could hurt somebody else.
In another example, Noah’s interview response reflects her burgeoning recognition about how language affects others. In response to my question, “Outside of class have these discussions and texts about sexuality influenced you at all?”, she said, “Yeah, like using certain terminology just aloud and how it affects other people.”

Another student, Britt, indicated a similar stance in an interview following the sexuality unit:

Let me think. Well the whole thing the ga - that's gay thing cause I say that a lot so and then like we saw the commercials or whatever about people saying it, I was like and then like used the term but I didn't say like what those two girls I just said that's Owen.

These three examples show how students confronted their own and others’ use of commonly-used word choices and their recognition of the negative impact language can have on others.

Some students moved beyond mere awareness of the negativity of language usage and developed explicit intentions to modify their words. Vadasz recorded her aspiration to be more aware of her expressions in her end of year social justice portfolio: “I need to watch what I say like “don’t be a sissy” and “that’s gay.” I didn’t realize I could easily be offending those around me.” Like Vadasz, some students became more consciously aware that the language they used was hurtful and some made attempts to alter their language use.

Class discussions and texts provoked students to appreciate how words have positive and negative significance and challenged them to interrogate and modify their language to avoid harming others. This finding is comparable to Payne’s (2010)
conclusions about a teacher who prohibited the terms ‘gay’ and ‘retarded’ in her class, and who found: “the fears of my classroom being dominated by incorrect and alienating speech had been curbed by a simple written and verbal plea at the beginning of the school year” (p. 54). Similar to Payne’s students, the students in this study became aware of the negative use of the word “gay” and used their new awareness of the impact of language to change their language.

**Agency**

Many students took an active and agentive role in their learning as they changed and grew in their positions on gender and sexuality. They expressed change and agency in two distinct ways: expressing acceptance of LGBTQQ individuals and taking on an ally role.

**Expressing acceptance.** One way that some students actively modified their beliefs was through their expression of acceptance of LGBTQQ individuals, which I identified as their favorable reception of ideas with which they had been struggling. The students who acknowledged changes in their beliefs self-identified their own growth and acceptance of LGBTQQ individuals. Examples of their expressions of acceptance are illustrated in the excerpts from the interviews conducted after the sexuality unit:

**Excerpt 1**

Hannah: I guess I feel like more accepting towards other like now that I understand like can read and understand what they're coming from like their point of view. I'm probably more likely to like accept them like come to them with open arms, let them talk about anything [indistinct].

Deeej: I don't know like I guess it's like I dunno. Before I had like this class I'd like thought like gay people like shouldn't exist like I know - I never really believed like in their like beliefs ya know and I do this class and I had like more encounters with like gay people.
Like with like prom committee and stuff and like I actually talked to them and it seemed like how they cool they are, like what they do like, or actually help out like straight men you know. I really like think about it.

**Excerpt 2**

Vadasz: I see them [gay couple] I kinda like we know they kind of deserve a pat on the back for being so brave but yeah.

**Excerpt 3**

Ansley: Yeah that girl, that's when I realized I was more open minded about it. Cause then before then I'd just be like gay girls no. And then after watching that I was like yeah and [indistinct] who are like she's inspirational about how confident she is to just come out like that.

What is noteworthy in these students’ examples is that each individual fell on a continuum of acceptance pertaining to his or her individual beliefs about LGBTQ individuals. Hannah never verbally rejected homosexuality in class or in her written responses, but in the interview she conveyed that she had, indeed, made shifts in perspective and experienced newfound comfort with homosexuality. Deeej also shifted from admitting his homophobia-“I didn’t think gay people should exist”-to acceptance with the words, “how cool they are.” Vadasz replaced her feelings of contempt about gender and sexuality schemas -“I don’t like how she changes her mind whether she wants to be a boy or a girl all the time and I don’t like how she changes who she wants to be with based on the person”- to supportive statements when she offered in the sexuality interview, “They kind of deserve a pat on the back for being so brave.” Ansley who initially identified herself as someone who was accepting of homosexuality, realized through our study that she was biased toward gay women, but then progressed to expressing acceptance towards all LGBTQQ individuals. Thus, the range of acceptance
varied from a sense of recognition of their bias towards LGBTQ individuals, expressed by Hannah and Deeej, to a feeling of admiration, expressed by Vadasz and Ansley.

**Allies or not allies.** There were some students in the class who identified themselves as LGBTQ allies and who drew inspiration and encouragement from the curriculum as well as motivation to take action. Throughout the limited time of this study, the students who identified as allies sometimes took action advancing their ally position, but at other times they remained inactive in be(coming) an ally (Blackburn, 2012).

Ansley, Faith, Lucifer, and Ariel used class discussions as a forum to assert their ally stance, which originated from acceptance toward LGBTQ individuals. At the beginning of the semester the students’ in the ally group expressed their acceptance of LGBTQ individuals and through advocating for LGBTQ individuals in small group and whole class discussions demonstrated an ally stance. For example, Faith initially asserted her acceptance of LGBTQ relationships when she said: “Like honestly I just feel that I guess like, love is love and, I mean you can’t really choose that and everybody deserves that” (May 21, 2013, Sexuality group interview, Group two). In the same interview, Ariel remarked on her prolonged stance of acceptance toward LGBTQ individuals: “I’ve always like been open minded about like homosexuality and stuff” (May, 21, 2013, Sexuality group interview, Group two). All of the students in this group were unfaltering in their verbal acceptance of LGBTQ individuals, and their initial stance of acceptance guided them toward an ally stance by advocating acceptance in small group discussions.
Continuous discussions embedded in the social justice curriculum allowed these students to express their acceptance toward LGBTQ individuals and combat negative views of LGBTQ issues. The following two excerpts from the ally group interview demonstrate the challenges that they experienced as they expressed their acceptance of LGBTQ issues:

Excerpt 1

Ariel: I feel like with having Zumbob and Deej in the group, which they're very like, they say they're open minded but they're very closed minded and I'm like what they believe and like they state to their views and don't even take in opinions and they're just kind of like oh well it shouldn't be like gay marriage shouldn't be illegal or shouldn't be legal because you know it's shouldn't be like it's against the bible and just like random stuff like that. And so the fact that like they were so closed minded it was just kind of like they pushed my opinions to the side and didn't really care about like what I thought just because they're hard headed and they're like from the south and they're gonna stick to their beliefs and stuff. Shocker there [indistinct].

Excerpt 2

Ansley: Uhm I feel like in my group we had uh Tylerand, Britt Britt and I. And so of course Tylerand had nothing to do with the conversations it was always just me and Britt Britt. Uh completely 100% different per.. uhh like views on it, she was 100% against she was closed minded about it. Like, nope it's wrong I don't like it, it's gross. And I was more like well I've had coaches I've had friends and so I'm really open about it and I'm just really like just like accepting of it but so just trying to get her to like even consider like looking at my side of it, she was just so closed minded about. So I found it like challenging to try to get her to like look at it that way but yea I'd like I'd try to get her to open mind but it didn't really discourage me from any parts of it.

These two excerpts illustrate how some students dealt with having their opinions about LGBTQ issues ignored, rejected, and contested in small group discussions. Blackburn (2012) writes that, “allies risk vulnerability to combat homophobia because it matters” (p. 222).
These excerpts demonstrate how the students in the ally group risked criticism (Ansley) and ostracism from the group (Ariel) by expressing their acceptance of LGBTQ issues.

In addition, students previously identified as allies expressed that the sexuality unit encouraged and inspired them to articulate their ally stance in my classroom. The following excerpts from the ally group interview portrays their feelings that the sexuality unit helped to fortify their ally stance:

Excerpt 1

Ariel: Yeah. I guess I was kinda like encouraged by [the sexuality unit] because, like I said before you know, like I know a lot of like gay people just from like dancing and stuff and so like the fact that there were actually people willing to talk about it and like listen to other people’s opinions and stuff was kind of like encouraging cause most people are usually just like oh its bad, like gay marriage illegal, like you know

Excerpt 2

Ansley: I kind of agree with Ariel on it with like having a gay cheerleading coach and friends that are gay. It’s just I feel like now I’d know that there are different people that can help them with those cause I’d know that some of them who have struggled with it. And I prolly would not have made the smartest decisions on what to do with it but I feel like it helped me though to try to like help and get more involved because even though I’m …I have nothing against those people and I actually be like approve of it. I’ve never joined like any of the groups who seem to stand up for it and help it. So it just kind of inspired me to move to do that.

Ariel pointed out the importance of talking about sexuality in school as one way to begin to contest homophobia. She explained that discussions in our class gave her an opportunity to sustain and fortify her ally stance. Through our class experiences, Ansley found inspiration to join groups that supported LGBTQ students. Unfortunately, this
interview took place at the end of the school year and Ansley dropped out of school the following year.

Other students in this group also shared that they would join an advocacy group if the opportunity arose, illustrating their motivation to take action:

**Excerpt 1**

**Ansley:** I just wanna get more people into it and like join into it and just get it moving and do more things. Cause I mean if you do nothing no one's going to listen and join but the more that you do the more people are like they're going to notice it and they're going to be like hey well maybe and you get your viewpoint across.

**Excerpt 2**

**Lucifer:** Honestly I’ve if someone came up to me like and asked me to get involved I probably would be involved but I haven’t really taken active like steps to get involved in it. You know I’m, I’m, I’m not the nicest guy in the world but whenever I see someone like picking on someone for anything really I’ll be like stop. You know it’s backing she got to the point where people were picking on my friends so I started picking on them they stop but you know. And I you know I know I shouldn’t pick on people but I was trying to defend my friends. You know if people were being mean to you I’d generally want it to stop.

Although the students in these excerpts expressed their willingness to join an advocacy group, they attended a school with a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) and did not participate in the group, thus, they took action in limited ways. A next step in their process of be(coming) an ally is understanding what being an ally actually entails and taking action to further their ally stance. Based on my observations and data, there were no students that moved from the non-ally group to the ally group during data collection from January through May. As stated previously, the Transforming process is not complete at the end of data collection, therefore, there may be students now that identify
as an ally as a result of the experiences in the class, but the limited time span of the study did not reveal any movement from the non-ally to ally group.

**Stagnancy of Beliefs**

Some students, although they engaged in the curriculum, remained stagnant in some of their beliefs about gender and sexuality. For example, Zumbob completed an anticipation guide at the beginning of the gender unit and answered similar questions again at the end of the sexuality unit in which he exhibited stagnancy. He maintained a strong disagreement with gay marriage and continued to feel that it was acceptable to use words like “that’s gay” and “fag”. Zumbob engaged in the curriculum and was honest about his opinions, but he resisted changing them. Another example, is Ralph’s comment in an interview after the sexuality unit portraying his static view of using damaging language related to LGBTQQ individuals:

I thought like since we watched those advertisements I thought that I’ve thought about when I can go to use the word gay like all the differences and like when I say it like I make sure like if there's anybody around and that could be like offended because some people do get offended some people and some people smack off so I thought about like before I said it, stuff like that.

Although Ralph was somewhat thoughtful about harmful language, he was uncommitted to actually changing his actions. His words also indicate that he avoided being moved by the explicit message delivered in class that LGBTQQ individuals are part of our society and cannot be identified by appearance. Ralph’s response indicated that the lesson about the impact of language made him aware of how some people are offended by the phrase
“that’s gay,” but he only intended to curb the use of the phrase when he identifies an LGBTQQQ person nearby, revealing that he is not truly changing his behavior.

Two other students self-identified as not experiencing any change through the social justice units. In the sexuality unit interview, Tyler stated: “I mean I pretty much felt the same throughout” and Fernando commented: “I found no changes”. On the other hand, while some students stated that they did not experience a change, I found evidence of transformation through data analysis. For example, Noah said she still maintained the same beliefs from the beginning to end of the study, but in an interview following the sexuality unit she acknowledged her new awareness of how society creates gender roles saying, “It makes you [think] about how and exactly gender works like not only is it in the genes but society conditions us to be a certain way.” Vadasz also stated that she retained the same beliefs across the experience, but in an interview following the sexuality unit admitted her newfound acceptance of LGBTQQQ individuals. She said, “I see them [gay couple] I kinda like we know they kind of deserve a pat on the back for being so brave but yeah.” Out of 16 participants, I found that four participants remained stagnant in their beliefs about LGBTQQQ issues and gender.

**Victim Mentality**

When I wrote the proposal for this dissertation study, I included in my curricular plan the same texts and materials (books, articles, videos) that I used for the pilot study, but after reading deeply in the field of critical literacy and LGBTQQQ studies I became acutely aware that my curriculum lacked coherence, lacked texts that interested students, and included texts that perpetuated LGBTQQQ individuals as victims. An excerpt from my research journal from March 25, 2013 illustrates my struggles:
So the reality of my newfound knowledge on my teaching is that I’m confused, so how do I fight against homophobia in such a conservative place that still teaches abstinence while being accepting of different lifestyles. How do I overcome the victim-bully dichotomy without reinforcing it? I’m kinda having a panic attack because I don’t think the materials and lessons I have planned are adequate and I’m not happy with them to achieve what I want them to but I don’t know what else to do and basically nobody else is publishing outside of that framework so I don’t have any models to follow, I’m stuck.

Consequently, when finalizing the gender and sexuality units for the dissertation study, I altered the texts used with students to position LGBTQQ individuals in less of a victim and more agentive roles. I also altered the curricular activities to intentionally position LGBTQQ individuals toward the agentive side of the victim/agent continuum. I did this to thwart the negative depictions of LGBTQQ individuals that often dominate societal views. For example, I provided articles that showed LGBTQQ individuals as agents in their own lives (Ridley, 2012; Roberts, 2012) and we watched videos that explored issues of individuals promoting acceptance of diversity and that reported on agentive work done by LGBTQQ people (Green, 2012; Think B4 You Speak (That's So Gay), 2008; Wright, 2013). In addition to the texts, I used explicit instruction to explain how the LGBTQQ individuals in the article combat the heterosexual oppression and victimization through their actions depicted in the text. Yet, for all of these materials and my intentionality to provide multiple perspectives on LGBTQQ people, a victim mentality persisted. At the end of the study, most students continued to relegate LGBTQQ individuals to the role of victim.
One example of continuing to relegate LGBTQ people to victim roles was in Zumbob’s end-of-year survey when he described his perception about harm that LGBTQ individuals suffer: “People get mistreated for their sexuality.” Similarly, Greg’s response to the article, “The Transgender Athlete” (2012) portrayed his inability to see LGBTQ individuals beyond victims of physical violence when he wrote: “That is very wrong for people to physically hurt someone just because of their stupid decisions to be gay.” Across all other data, he never revealed anything that led me to believe that he saw LGBTQ people as other than victims. In both cases, the students positioned LGBTQ individuals as targets of unfair treatment. Their dominant view seemed to be that LGBTQ individuals were solely victims of physical violence and harassment, which became clear in discussions and written responses most participants in the study.

Similarly, other students offered sympathy toward LGBTQ individuals placing them in a victim status. This victim mentality was portrayed in the following group interview after the gender unit:

Deeej: Kinda like the same thing but like seeing how like tough those people’s lives are that like transgenders and stuff like that and how hard they had to like struggle. Kinda like being more accepting of it and like understandable.

Deeej: Probably like the articles you read and like seeing how hard it was for them to like go through life and have to like decide and it's like not their fault and it's just like changes your born with, not having a normal life.

Hannah: Yeah like they have to live with being different and they have to accept that and they just, like they want other people to accept it.

Faith: Yeah I agree with them. Like I guess it's just that what they've been through and stuff and a lot of people aren't understanding of that because they've never really had to been gone through that.
The sympathy attitude, despite being a positive emotion for students to express, also perpetuated the outlook that LGBTQQ individuals are solely victims.

Even within the self-identified ally group, students perpetuated the victim stereotype. Some students in the ally group asserted the importance of resisting bullying and preventing suicide of LGBTQQ individuals. While both are valid concerns, they ultimately maintained the victim mentality:

Excerpt 1

Ariel: I mean I do because I think everybody should like take in other people’s opinions and be kind of open minded about it because you, like Ansley said earlier, you never know how someone's going to feel because you say something and they can go back and commit suicide or be in depression for a long time because of something you said and so I think it’s like good to talk about it and like let other people know and stuff and just be more open about things in school.

Excerpt 2

Ansley: Like, I found out like, just judging other people for their choices or how they are, I feel like that's wrong to do and I don't want to be responsible for like, cause people do take like major stuff like people commit suicide for that kind of stuff. And I don't want to be that person who's that responsible for it cause I would die of guilt because it’s just horrible. And I feel like everyone just needs to be accepting because I mean it’s just I mean it might be in the bible from the south but it’s the 21st century and it’s time to kind of realize that this is our world and we just need to become accepting about it.

These excerpts reveal the students’ increased awareness of bullying and their awareness of the alarming statistics regarding LGBTQQ suicides, but their focus solely on those issues ultimately added to the negative depictions of LGBTQQ individuals solely as victims.

In a follow up interview with Noah, she described this resistance to an agentive stance while acknowledging my attempts to position LGBTQQ individuals as agents:
Teacher: If there's homosexuals in the classroom, you know they need to see that there are positive role models as well. So I was very like conscientious about that because of my reading. Do you think that that was noticeable and you know do you have any comments about that?

Noah: It was noticeable but then again, that's what like all everybody else relates back to the bullying and all the other stuff so then it goes back to that. But you - I could see that you did try that but it didn’t.

Noah seemed to feel that victim stereotypes of LGBTQQ individuals were too deep-seated to be altered by the instruction in my class. Although she did not say it in this interview, I felt that Noah was referring to the many news reports of bullying and suicide that readers and viewers see in print and on screen, reports that perpetuate this point of view.

**My Own Engagement, Becoming, and Transformation**

The transformation from Public Speaking teacher to social justice educator began several years prior to conducting this study. The content of my graduate courses, the friends, students, and colleagues that entered my life, and my burgeoning awareness of the inequity that many students face as a result of heteronormativity and homophobia propelled me to the creation of this study. Although my transformation spanned several years and continues to evolve as my beliefs and teaching change, the following section documents my own process of learning, exclusively focusing on my experience from January through May while I was gathering data. Looking at my experience, I came to see Engagement as the recognition of my own fears and biases, Becoming as the process of overcoming student challenges, and Transformation as my growth as a teacher-researcher.
Engagement: Recognition of My Fears and Biases

As a reflective practitioner, I am aware that I have biases and fears, and as a result of constant reflection and my interactions with students during this study, those fears and biases became clear. Through intentional actions, I attempted to interrupt and prevent them from impeding my teaching but I also recognize that it was through the teaching that important fears and biases came to light. For example, on May 13, 2013, in my Researcher’s Journal I wrote about my fear of showing the video *50 Shades of Gay* (2013) by iO Tillet Wright:

I was a little nervous as I played the video because it was obvious what my feelings were on the topic, it [the video] wasn't pro/con gay marriage it was pro equality INCLUDING gay marriage. I wasn't sure how the students would react but they were respectful.

This excerpt shows my initial hesitation to show the video because I was afraid of the students’ response. Fortunately, I overcame my fears by showing the video and realized those fears were groundless as many students engaged with the video (described in previous sections). Confronting my fears showed me that I should not make teaching decisions based on unfounded fears.

I also reflected on my teaching practice as I conducted the study, and in combination with continuous professional reading, I became cognizant of biases. The following excerpt from my Researcher’s Journal on April 29, 2013, demonstrates how I identified my bias and set goals to reduce it:

As I was teaching I realized that I was positioning all of my students as heterosexuals asking them to identify one way they experience heterosexual
privilege. I need to work on that because I consciously know at least one of my students is gay. I have been consciously working on positioning all of my students as not homophobic regardless of the comments they make.

This excerpt illustrates that I assumed all of my students were heterosexual. As a direct result of reading Blackburn’s (2012) work that advises teachers to avoid positioning all students as homophobic, I became aware of the language I used to position my own students as heterosexual. Therefore, I needed to alter my language to be LGBTQQ inclusive. Engaging in the process of identifying biases such as these allowed me to challenge and overcome them.

As I studied concepts about gender with my students, I became aware of my bias and reliance on strict gender roles. Discussion about gender roles with my students revealed to me that I resisted strict gender roles for my son. For example, the following excerpt is from a discussion with my students about the article “Lucky Boy” (Roberts, 2012) where I resisted the societal norm that boys should not play with dolls:

Did you think that there's anything detrimental to a boy playing with a doll? I mean do you think that's going to make him gay? like the way that you phrase it kinda made it sound like that that's what would be the inevitable result of why you would let your kid like I let my son play with a doll that means he's going to be gay.

Although this data excerpt demonstrates how I challenged students’ belief that following predetermined gender roles determines sexuality, it made me aware that I have less rigid expectations for my son. For example, I allow my son to play dress up in girl clothes, drink out of pink hello kitty cups, and carry around a pink sequin purse. On the other hand, later in the semester during a discussion about the video 50 Shades of Gay (Wright, 2013) I acknowledged my personal limitations regarding gender expression, specifically my daughter’s feminine gender expression:
Teacher: Well, even-even as a parent, like and I'm a very open minded parent I'm like, you know. That would be difficult for me you know what I mean to just be like ok, I'll let you be a boy today. No that-you know. That I would be-

Vadasz: Honestly.

Noah: Hold on hold on wait a second.

Vadasz: Hold on if Riley came to you and she was like I'm shaving my hair because the boys won't let me play basketball and I want to be a boy.

Teacher: Absolutely not.

Zumbob: Ok so hold on.

Vadasz: Why not? Why not? Everyone-

Zumbob: You said-way back that you would allow them to-her to play with boy toys and her-him to play with girl toys.

Vadasz: What's the difference? Except for disses in public?

Teacher: If she shaved her hair?

Noah: It's hair like

Vadasz: Hair-it grows back.

Noah: It'll grow back.

Teacher: I dunno. It stresses me out though.

This data excerpt portrays my increasing awareness of how society has shaped my beliefs and my uninterrogated reliance on how females should express gender. Reflection and discussion enabled me to identify my bias regarding gender roles for both males and females, as well as the bias I possessed toward gender expression for my son and daughter.
Becoming: Overcoming Student Challenges

Many of the challenges I encountered during the data gathering process occurred in the process of teaching, specifically pertaining to student reactions to the texts and activities, from which I learned valuable lessons to improve my teaching. For example, after reading “The Transgender Athlete” (Ridley, 2012) I recorded my reaction to the class’ response: “I wasn’t prepared for all the questions because last semester it was more hostility than curiosity.” This reflection from my Researcher’s Journal illustrates my unpreparedness to answer student questions and refocus the discussion on oppression without discouraging student engagement. This instance made me aware that I needed to provide background information about being transgender in order to focus the conversation on oppression.

Another example from my process of Becoming occurred after we watched a compilation of commercials produced by Think B4 You Speak (2008) addressing the impact of using the phrase “that’s so gay”. The following excerpt, recorded in my Researcher’s Journal on May 7, 2013, illustrates how I addressed student resistance to the idea that using “that’s so gay” is hurtful:

After the commercials were played and the small group discussions I asked for big ideas and the class bombarded with me saying that they didn’t think it was offensive, they knew people who were gay that didn’t think saying that’s so gay was offensive, if gay used to mean happy, why can’t we just let the word evolve to mean stupid, Zumbob said she is trying to change the way we do things and that’s not going to happen. I explained I’m not the spokesperson for all gay people, but it is offensive to some people, and we are changing the context to mean something
that is offensive, I’m asking them to just consider their word choices and what they mean and what you are actually saying when you say those things, they said the word retarded was different because retarded actually means stupid or slow and you are using it as a put down, but when you say it’s gay you don’t mean homosexual you mean stupid so if we know the intention behind why can’t we use it? Zumbob said when he uses the word gay he means gay, but I explained that most of the time he didn’t he meant not masculine and he said no.

Many students initially resisted the idea that the phrase “that’s so gay” was offensive, but through further discussion on the impact of language many students altered their opinions. This confrontation with students’ response challenged me to remain a learner and questioner along with my students, but also reminded me that the dialogue that we were engaging in was a necessary and important part of the process in our Becoming.

**Transformation: Growth as a Teacher-Researcher and Agent**

The cyclical process of reading literature, engaging with students, and reflecting on my experiences incited my Transforming process, which led to my growth as a teacher-researcher improving my teaching practice and also using my agency to affect change in new ways. In this first excerpt from my Researcher’s Journal written on February 28, 2013, I reflected on new ideas about LGBTQQ silence gained from professional reading and how I could use that knowledge in the future to address student responses:

I’ve been immersed in social justice literature at this point, but I read some SJE pertaining to LGBTQQ and gender issues and one article I read positioned the silence that many gay students use as a coping technique as an agentive act. I
think that nugget of information will be helpful in avoiding positioning LGBTQ students as victims, which often happens when discussing those issues. It also talked about how gay students are silent, not because they think there is something wrong with themselves, there is something wrong with other people who don’t accept them. I think that is an important concept because often framed in religious and media debates is that being gay is not the “norm” and because it falls outside the “norm” they are hiding their sexuality because they are ashamed and know it’s wrong, but in actuality the individuals are coping with the intolerance of others to their sexuality, they aren’t coming out because of others hurtful words and actions, not because they think their sexual orientation is wrong. This is a big aha for me because I had a student a couple years ago make a comment about if they don’t think there is anything wrong with their sexual orientation why do they hide it. She was very homophobic and struggled with listening to others opinions in this area. At the time I didn’t really have a good answer without positioning LGBTQ people as victims, but this article positions it differently.

Reading and reflection allowed me to build my teaching tool-belt with knowledge and tools to address student resistance in the future. Improving my teaching is a key way that I experienced transformation as a teacher-researcher.

Another way that I experienced growth was through constant examination of my beliefs and how they impacted my teaching. I recorded the following realization on April 16, 2013 in my Researcher’s Journal:
When I met with my counselor this evening I realized that I am becoming a critical educator. My work with social justice topics has infiltrated how I approach the English 2 curriculum. Is there any turning back at this point? I am a critical social justice educator, it’s who I am and I don’t think I can teach in any other way and feel fulfilled in my job. It affects the curriculum I create and how I approach all content.

This excerpt portrays how I recognized the changes and growth I experienced as a teacher resulting from reading, classroom experiences, and reflection. In addition, this reflection affirmed my stance as a critical-social justice educator, which enhanced my teaching because I continue to utilize and model this identity for my students. Through my own Transformation process, I realized that silence is unacceptable, and by modeling my ally stance through words and actions, I am demonstrating agency. Writing this dissertation initiated my agentive stance toward LGBTQ and gender nonconforming individuals, and encouraged me to take action outside of my classroom by mentoring my school’s Gay-Straight Alliance, getting involved in local LGBTQ advocacy groups, and petition for change through e-mails and other online movements for equality.

**Discussion**

This study investigated the ways that students’ beliefs, opinions, and actions were influenced by a social justice curriculum focused on gender and sexuality. I used an oppression lens, which requires an implicit attitude towards equality that undergirds the analysis of naturalized assumptions and beliefs. The oppression lens that grounded this study grew out of theory and research of critical educational theory, critical literacy, democratic education, social justice education, culturally responsive pedagogies,
multicultural education, and LGBTQQ inclusive curriculum. The lens focused on three primary elements: agency, understanding the oppression cycle, and praxis. The following discussion elaborates the significance of the findings and how students enacted the oppression lens.

**Significance of the study**

This dissertation attempted to address four key themes prevalent in the literature relevant to the imperative necessity of interrupting homophobia and heteronormativity in educational institutions. The findings from this study provide valuable insights into the following areas related to LGBTQQ issues in education: school climate, victim and agency, gender roles, and absence in school curricula.

**School climate.** Research highlights the negative school climate of most schools for LGBTQQ and gender nonconforming students (Black and Underwood, 1998; Blackburn, 2004; Blackburn, 2012; Muñoz-Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds, 2002; Pascoe, 2007; Pearson, Muller, and Wilkinson, 2007, Ryan, 2003). Although this study did not address the school climate, it did demonstrate how a classroom climate was influenced by an LGBTQQ inclusive curriculum with the potential for altering the school climate. The *Transforming* phase of the CTSJE offers a small portrait of how the students in this study experienced change that illustrates the potential of how an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula could impact a school climate. In the *Transforming* phase students’ experiences fell along a continuum from awareness to agency as they began to understand their complicity in the cycle of oppression. These experiences are useful to demonstrate how their newfound awareness and agency altered their behavior. For example, Vadasz asserted that she would stop using phrases like “that’s gay.” In addition, some students
expressed acceptance like Deeej stating “how cool they are” and Vadasz stating “they kind of deserve a pat on the back for being so brave”. Furthermore, some students positioned themselves as allies in group discussions and taking action in limited ways by alleging they might join a school advocacy group like the school’s Gay Straight Alliance (GSA). These transformations not only altered individual beliefs and actions, it created a classroom environment that was intolerant of expressions of beliefs that subjugate marginalized voices. If these students continue to employ the agency they experienced while engaging in an LGBTQ inclusive curricula, there is the potential that they may influence the school climate.

**Victim and agency.** Agency research suggests that LGBTQ individuals are often portrayed as victims, but this body of research fails to recognize the agency of LGBTQ individuals (Clark and Blackburn, 2009; Muñoz-Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds, 2002). Despite my attempt at creating a curriculum that positioned LGBTQ individuals as agents, students continued to relegate them as victims. Many students posited their view that all people in American society should be treated fairly and equally; a view that was reiterated in class discussions and written responses. Therefore, when I confronted students with questions about homophobia, sexism, classism, and racism they adamantly opposed the mistreatment of people based on their social group, because that stance complemented their view of all individuals deserving equal treatment. Unfortunately, students failed to acknowledge how their own privilege, not just overt homophobic, sexist, or transphobic actions, subjugated marginalized groups. Viewing LGBTQ individuals as part of a group that deserves equal treatment, is not currently receiving equal treatment, and failing to recognize their own privilege allowed them to perpetuate
the people in these groups as victims.

Most students viewed homophobia as acts of overt physical and verbal harassment, failing to recognize how silencing, invalidating, and ostracizing LGBTQ students are also forms of homophobia. Some students made statements asserting they would never physically or verbally harass an LGBTQ individual, avoiding the label of being homophobic, simultaneously making homophobic comments like “gays should be wiped off the planet” or “their stupid decision to be gay.” Although this is a contradiction in their personal beliefs, it allows some students to maintain prejudiced views, and relegate LGBTQ individuals as victims. In addition, as I struggled to negotiate the tension between giving students a safe space for discussion of various opinions and preventing oppression of LGBTQ voices, my silence at times perpetuated the victim mentality. For example, as students explored the article *The Transgender Athlete* (Ridley, 2012), I attempted to give them space to flesh out their ideas and largely remained silent except to clarify misunderstandings. Zumbob stated he wasn't "for transgender" and that he wouldn't "beat them up", portraying his fear and demonstrating his perception that transgender individuals are susceptible to violence and can not defend themselves. In the moment, I attempted to allow students freedom to express their opinions, but as I reflected on this interaction, I realized my silence failed to interrupt the victim mentality, and instead contributed to it.

**Gender roles.** Homophobia and heteronormativity are perpetuated through adherence to strict gender roles, often naturalized and unquestioned, maintained in educational institutions (Kosciw, 2010; Pascoe, 2007). In this study, students uncovered stereotypes and assumptions about gender that they accepted as true, as they engaged in
dialogue and activities. The most revealing data originated from discussions about transgender individuals because it complicated their assumptions about gender. Although, students did not explicitly use the terminology *gender nonconforming*, findings show them questioning, examining, challenging, and, in some cases, transforming their conceptions of gender and gender nonconforming individuals by recognizing their beliefs in rigid gender and sexuality roles and related contradictions and misperceptions. Discomfort and resistance supported by specific texts and safe spaces for discussion led the way for some of them to begin reformulating their personal philosophies.

**Absence in school curricula.** Clark and Blackburn (2009) note the absence of LGBTQQ inclusive curricula in most schools, despite the multitude of theorists who suggest that it can decrease homophobia and interrupt heteronormativity (Daniel, 2007; Swartz, 2003; Winans, 2006). Although the findings from this study support the use of an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula based on the positive student responses in the *Transforming* phase, there are no conclusive results regarding a decrease of homophobia and interruption of heteronormativity. Students had not been previously taught about gender and sexuality, reiterating the absence of LGBTQQ inclusive curricula throughout the school. This suggests that although an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula is beneficial in one class, students need more time and experiences discussing LGBTQQ topics and power, privilege, and oppression in order to deepen their understanding.

**Oppression Lens Enacted**

The oppression lens, introduced in Chapter I, grounded this study. I define it as the awareness of and reflection on relationships within the learning context and how they shape, and are shaped, by instruction that investigates the concepts of power, privilege,
and oppression. The oppression lens that I developed uses praxis, agency in the form of reflection and action, and an understanding of the oppression cycle to challenge social injustices originating from oppression. As students engaged in the curriculum (established from an oppression lens) they uncovered messages about gender, sexuality, and stereotypes, the origins of their beliefs and contradictions in them, their own roles in perpetuating systems of oppression and privilege, and the complexity of LGBTQ issues. The instruction that took place led to students’ recognition of implicit and explicit messages received from home, school, and religious contexts. Students became aware of entrenched stereotypes and unexamined beliefs that unconsciously guided their actions. By uncovering those messages, some students were able to confront entrenched biases, examine oppression that exists in society, and begin to consider how to take action. These findings feature important notions regarding the students’ enactment of the oppression lens. The following sections illuminate the findings with regard to the key components of an oppression lens: institutional and social power, privilege and oppression, personal power, and agency: interrupting or perpetuating.

**Institutional and social power.** The critical curriculum in which the students engaged solicited their attention to institutional and social power and its relationship to oppression (Appendices P, Q, T, U, V). Specifically, students identified how institutional power, like the media and religious institutions, convey messages that are often accepted without question. For example, Greg interrogated the purpose and impact of the Think B4 You Speak commercials illustrating the power and influence that media has on individuals and society. Many students also acknowledged the influence that religious institutions had on shaping their beliefs about gender and sexuality. Several discussions
demonstrated how students began to unpack the multi-faceted role, social power plays in our society. For example, Vadasz, Zumbob, and Noah discussed the social power that males have, especially if they identify as stereotypically masculine. Unfortunately, most students did not move beyond identifying these powerful influences.

**Privilege and Oppression.** Through explicit instruction and activities (Appendices O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V) I drew students’ attention to the concepts of privilege and oppression. During discussion and in written responses students named privileges, ways institutions oppress groups, and actions to interrupt oppression, but they failed to recognize their own heterosexual privilege and floundered when making connections between the concepts of power, privilege, and oppression in their own lives and school. This suggests that the students in this study did not see the connection between personal beliefs (homophobia), institutional rules and policies (heteronormativity), and oppression of LGBTQQQ individuals.

**Personal Power.** Most students used their personal power to resist or engage in the curriculum and concepts under study. Throughout the *Engaging, Becoming,* and *Transforming* phases, students applied their personal power to increase their personal knowledge in ways described by Bell and Griffin (2007):

Through examining personal awareness, participants can develop greater clarity about the differential treatment they receive as a result of their own social group memberships. They can learn to identify and challenge what are often unexamined beliefs about themselves and others and understand how these beliefs have been established through an unequal system based on hierarchies of privilege and power. (p. 70)
To illustrate, a major contradiction/conflict, the students began to question the message that everyone in our society is equal, free, and has equitable opportunities to succeed. Most students confronted the reality that double standards exist, challenging a belief that equity is a reality. This realization sometimes led to intense emotional reactions: anger and resistance to curriculum, instructional strategies and willingness to explore complex issues. I encouraged them to share and interrogate their feelings, and modeled similar vulnerabilities as I shared my own. This enabled them to better understand and, in some cases, move past feelings of bias, anger, and resistance. The students in this study were given the time and support to begin to unravel their identity histories/beliefs in conjunction with the stories and histories of LGBTQQ people and related issues. Students’ experience in the CTSJE illustrates how they resisted and engaged at different points.

The conflict and contradictions with which students struggled mirrored my own. Students appeared to be novices in their understanding of social justice and the links between institutional power, privilege, and oppression, and they needed more opportunities with these concepts to drive their learning forward. My effort to maintain a safe and comfortable environment for students to explore their opinions contradicted my efforts to challenge student views that perpetuated homophobia, heteronormative, and LGBTQQ victim mentality. I grappled with finding a balance. The tensions I experienced and the tensions my students experienced led to perspectives that sometimes perpetuated, and at other times interrupted, oppressive views.

**Agency: perpetuating and interrupting.** After careful review of the data excerpts and findings from this study, I became aware that the ways in which we responded to
content or discussion topics often perpetuated or interrupted homophobia, heteronormativity, and a victim perspective of LGBTQQ individuals. In many of the student discussions, they began to identify concepts and beliefs, or name their world (1970), beginning to question and unravel and interrupt. Oftentimes, students and I failed to progress past naming, and ultimately perpetuated oppressive beliefs. In this section I first discuss the ways in which students and I, at varying times, perpetuated or interrupted oppression, specifically homophobia, heteronormativity, and LGBTQQ victim mentality.

**Students perpetuating.** At times students perpetuated the concept of oppression in peer conversations. In most cases, students were unable to make connections between the role of institutions and group oppression, ignoring and perpetuating the oppression of LGBTQQ individuals in their conversations. For example, Zumbob failed to recognize societal impact on the oppression of LGBTQQ individuals when he suggested there was not a need for activities like The Day of Silence. A second example is that students identified teachers’ silence as a personal choice, not the influence of the educational institution that controls what they teach.

Another instance of students perpetuating oppression, is their disregard of the unearned privileges that occur as a result of the rigid gender and sexuality biases that they held. Many students uncovered and named their biases, but they did not examine how those biases impacted them or their role in oppression. When students discussed ideas about being American, equality, and freedom they ignored privileges that advantaged groups receive as a root cause for many social injustices, perpetuating oppression.

**Students interrupting.** Although there were times that dialogue perpetuated oppression, at other times students interrupted oppressive discourse. Peer discussion
opened up students to multiple viewpoints, often challenging other students’ beliefs, ideas, and opinions. In addition, students’ burgeoning critical eye assisted them in recognizing instances of power and oppression. For example, Noah, Vadasz, and Zumbob discussed how gender expectations were regulated so harshly for boys because masculinity holds power in society. They began to reflect on the relationship between personal beliefs and social power related to gender and sexism. Students interrupted their common sense notions of gender by questioning and reflecting on those relationships.

There were some students who adhered to unquestioned religious and family beliefs, but others rebuked those messages. Many students that questioned religious and family members’ beliefs interrupted the cycle of oppression by verbally contradicting their family members, religious leaders, and other students in the class.

**Teacher perpetuating.** Building relationships with students and community in the classroom were important to creating an environment that supported critical inquiry (Compton-Lily, 2004; Dantas and Manyak, 2010; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Unfortunately, some of the relationship building strategies I used limited my potential to provide critical remarks and challenges to student responses. These strategies included: tone of voice and humor, personal stories, and modeling vulnerability. Sometimes my jesting failed to push students’ boundaries and confront ways in which they expressed homophobia and ignored their heterosexual privilege. Although my intent was to give students time and opportunity to delve into concepts, the strategies sometimes served to deflect these important conversations and unintentionally perpetuated oppression.

**Teacher interrupting.** On the other hand, I interrupted homophobia, heteronormativity, and a victim perspective of LGBTQQ individuals by choosing articles,
videos, and explicit instruction (intentionally created curriculum) that positioned LGBTQQ individuals as agents, encouraged students to question their heterosexual privilege, and promote them to take on an ally position. In addition, some relationship building strategies were interrupting behaviors: keeping it real, co-constructed rules of engagement, and communicating views without indoctrination. These strategies allowed me to support student discussion and inquiry, but provided critique, challenges, and disruptions of student responses that perpetuated stereotypes of gender and sexuality. Although I was determined to disrupt oppression when I set out to conduct this study, upon reflection of my data, the tension between letting students express their opinions and pushing the boundaries of their beliefs limited my critique to mostly challenging stereotypes and clarifying misperceptions.

**Conclusion**

Critical education, which undergirds my teaching, advocates for teachers to adopt a teacher-as-learner positionality (Freire, 1970). In my experience, I have found that students often expect the teacher to be deliverer of knowledge and more importantly the giver of correct answers and good grades. Often teachers also see this as their role. However, I believe that teachers have important social justice roles and that affecting change toward a more equitable society undergirds our responsibility as educators. In order to be effective (the definition depends on the teacher), I believe that we must walk a tightrope between using our knowledge, course content, abilities as leaders and learners with modeling reflective and agentive behaviors. The findings from this study demonstrate how these critical behaviors laid the foundation for my development of curriculum and ability to engage students in that curriculum and, in many cases, to
progress along a continuum that is the CTSJE model. As shown through data excerpts, the students and I Engaged in the curriculum that led many of us to Becoming and, in some instances, Transforming.

As some students reflected on their growth, I noticed transformations that ranged from changes in awareness to developing a sense of agency but I also recognized instances of non-change or stagnancy. However, even the students who seemed stagnant in their beliefs became more aware of how their beliefs were formed and how their beliefs shaped their actions. Thus, changes occurred at different points in the curriculum and at different levels of intensity. They were not necessarily linear but cyclical as new knowledge, examination of home and church messages, and class discussions caused students to move back and forth examining contradictions in their thinking and experiences. In the process - as students synthesized information, engaged in activities, and confronted their feelings - many gradually experienced awareness that led to seeing themselves, as Bell and Griffin (2007) write, as potential agents of change “Our goal is for participants to see themselves as agents of change, capable of acting on their convictions and in concert with others against the injustices they see” (p. 72).

Friere (1970) advocated for the importance of praxis-reflection and action that leads to transformation in order to contest social injustices. He coined the term praxis to mean “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51). My strong assumption is that praxis for these students did not end at the completion of the Public Speaking class. I believe that the students continue to reflect on, extend, and use what they learned to position and reposition themselves as participants in the world and as potential agents of change. For instance, I continue to receive e-mails from students
suggesting videos or articles to use in my social justice curriculum. I also have students stop by my room to visit and they mention experiences in other classes or in their lives that connected to their learning in the social justice curriculum. Chapter V will present the implications of these findings for taking legislative action, institutional moves, curricular suggestions, and my own plans for change.
CHAPTER V

IMPLICATIONS

Federal mandates (EEOA, 1974) assert that schools must provide an equal education to all students, and when the school relays negative messages through silence or the absence of curricula that are inclusive of sexuality, the school is violating that promise. In addition, the absence of an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula perpetuates heteronormativity, which contributes to negative portrayals of LGBTQQ individuals (Blackburn and Buckley, 2005; Szalacha, 2004). The purpose of this study was to examine the ways that negative portrayals of LGBTQQ youth might be altered through an exploration of LGBTQQ texts and critical discussions surrounding the texts, media stereotypes, heteronormativity, heterosexual privilege, and gender in a high school Public Speaking class. My research questions were:

- What happens when a critical literacy/social justice approach to curriculum and teaching is used in a grades 9-12 Public Speaking class to support students’ examination of attitudes, beliefs, and actions regarding the discrimination against and oppression of LGBTQQ people and related issues?
- How does the inclusion of specific texts, discussions, and assignments impact students’ beliefs about LGBTQQ issues?
- How does the inclusion of texts, discussions, and assignments impact students’ beliefs about gender roles?
- How does the inclusion of texts, discussions, and assignments about gender roles impact students’ beliefs about LGBTQQ issues?
- How does the inclusion of specific instructional strategies and texts impact students’ beliefs about LGBTQQ people as agents versus victims?

The findings in Chapter IV were viewed through an oppression lens, which I define as the awareness of and reflection on relationships within the learning context and how they shape, and are shaped, by instruction that investigates the concepts of power, privilege, and oppression. An oppression lens uses praxis and an understanding of the oppression cycle to understand how agency develops to challenge social injustices originating from oppression. The findings from Chapter IV, correlate to the oppression lens, and present an impetus for potential classroom, institutional, and legislative changes to decrease heteronormativity and homophobia and ultimately to improve the quality of education for all students. Figure 5.1 illustrates the organization for the implications discussed in this chapter focused on those three areas of potential impact.

Figure 5.1 Implication Categories That Organize This Chapter
Table 5.1 gives a brief overview of the implications as they fall within each category presented in Figure 5.1 and the intended audiences.

Table 5.1

*Findings and Implications*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Findings</th>
<th>Implications</th>
<th>Audience</th>
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<tr>
<td>An intentionally-constructed environment, intentionally-created curriculum, and intentionally-developed instructional strategies were the most successful instructional strategies for engaging students in ways that led to increased awareness and agency regarding students’ views about LGBTQQ issues and gender nonconforming individuals.</td>
<td>• Use Supportive Instructional Strategies&lt;br&gt;• Seek supportive resources for students.&lt;br&gt;• Develop a learner’s stance.&lt;br&gt;• Utilize the CTSJE model.</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
</tr>
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<td>In spite of the use of texts that presented LGBTQQ people as agentive, the students continued to maintain a victim mentality. Co-constructed rules for engagement limited oppressive literacy practices, but teachers must be cognizant of how oppression that exists in society can be replicated in the classroom during small group dialogue.</td>
<td>• Intentionally contradict the LGBTQQ victim profile.&lt;br&gt;• Take care not to replicate oppressive practices in the classroom.&lt;br&gt;• Increase and vary experiences.</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My own engagement, becoming, and transformation revealed the challenges and tensions in my own beliefs and learning process; thus it was important for me to recognize my biases leading to a stronger ally stance, and ability to take a stand in my classroom and school to combat injustice.</td>
<td>• Take a stand.&lt;br&gt;• Prepare.&lt;br&gt;• Document&lt;br&gt;• Seek collegial support.&lt;br&gt;• Identify as activist.&lt;br&gt;• Take risks and do not assume.&lt;br&gt;• Confront fears.&lt;br&gt;• Resist.&lt;br&gt;• Find balance.</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Major Findings</td>
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<td>Action research methodology including data gathering, reflecting on my</td>
<td>• Use generative themes.</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
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<td>research journal, analysis, and writing led me to better understand and</td>
<td>• Draw on multiple viewpoints.</td>
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<td>improve my teaching and develop a personal teaching action plan.</td>
<td>• Increase the focus on agency.</td>
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<td>My own professional development through reading, research, and reflection</td>
<td>• Set clear expectations for discussion.</td>
<td>Institutional</td>
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<td>about LGBTQQQ and gender topics, enabled me to prepare, deliver, and alter</td>
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<td>instruction and respond to students in ways that led to their increased</td>
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<td>knowledge and greater understandings about inequities regarding LGBTQQQ and</td>
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<td>gender nonconforming individuals.</td>
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<td>Students uncovered and grappled with contradictions in their beliefs with</td>
<td>• Demonstrate administrative support.</td>
<td>Legislative</td>
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<td>the messages explicitly and implicitly delivered in school. An explicitly</td>
<td>• Support and engage in professional development.</td>
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<td>negative message in schools about LGBTQQQ people originates with a state</td>
<td>• Prepare an inclusive school setting.</td>
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<td>policy (Comprehensive Health Education Act) that regulates sexual education</td>
<td>• Provide resources.</td>
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<td>in our district. Students received misinformation and biased views from their</td>
<td>• Learn to deal with challenges.</td>
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<td>state-mandated sex education courses. In addition, there was an absence of</td>
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<td>gender and sexuality related curricula and silence from teachers about</td>
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<td>sexuality across their educational experiences.</td>
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<td>Many students experienced a transformation as a result of a social justice</td>
<td>• Access previous court precedents.</td>
<td>Legislative</td>
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<tr>
<td>curriculum focused on LGBTQQQ and gender issues, many students in this study</td>
<td>• Petition local governmental representatives.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>developed greater knowledge and awareness of inequities, contradictions, and</td>
<td>• Join advocacy groups.</td>
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<tr>
<td>misinformation regarding LGBTQQQ and transgender people.</td>
<td>• Advocate for LGBTQQQ-inclusive language in policies.</td>
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</table>
Major Findings | Implications | Audience
---|---|---
Further research is necessary to build further understandings. | • Study the impact of LGBTQ inclusive curricula on school environment.  
• Study family response to LGBTQ inclusive and exclusive curricula.  
• Study teacher-administrator challenges.  
• Approaches to homophobia and heteronormativity reduction.  
• Study discourse.  
• Study the nature and impact of supportive relationships.  
• Pedagogy and achievement.  
• Conducting longitudinal studies. | Researchers

Implications for Classrooms: Implementing a Social Justice Curriculum

The classroom is a dynamic site for potential transformations to occur. Many students in this study experienced a transformation stimulated by the social justice curriculum in which they engaged. A social justice education focuses on “understanding the social power dynamics and social equality that result in some social groups having privilege, status, and access, whereas other groups are disadvantaged, oppressed, and denied access” while a social diversity education focuses on “appreciating social differences without an emphasis on power dynamics or differential access to resources and institutional support needed to live safe, satisfying, productive lives” (Hardiman, Jackson, and Griffin, 2007, p. 58). An oppression lens embedded in a social justice curriculum alters the content, strategies, and goals; therefore, the following sections suggest implications for teachers interested in employing a social justice curriculum in
their classrooms with the goal of engaging students in a transformative critical education that illuminates the oppression cycle through praxis. These implications focus on successful strategies, limitations of curriculum, and personal response to the curriculum.

**Use Supportive Instructional Strategies**

The goal of a social justice curriculum, specifically focused on gender and sexuality, is to increase awareness of and to reduce homophobia and heteronormativity. The Cycle of Transformation in Social Justice Education (CTSJE) portrays how many students in this study experienced a change as a result of the curriculum. Data analysis revealed several successful strategies to guide students through the CTSJE model. I believe that the success of these strategies and positive results of the CTSJE correlates specifically to the oppression lens in which I grounded instruction. Teachers can use explicit instruction, foster dialogue, encourage inquiry, seek supportive resources for students, and develop a learner’s stance.

**Incorporate explicit instruction.** Explicit instruction is a valuable tool in a social justice curriculum because it intentionally requires students to consider the concepts of power, privilege, and oppression. Explaining the oppression cycle to students moves them beyond understanding homophobia as a personal attribute and to consider how social and institutional power contributes to the oppression of LGBTQ students. The findings from this study illustrate how I used explicit instruction to move students forward in their thinking by filling in gaps in their knowledge. In addition, I related the content to their initial understandings in order to build on what they already knew. Beginning with the personal adds to the success of explicit instruction because it allows students to connect what they already know to a new concept (Vygotsky, 1978).
The subsequent strategies, dialogue, inquiry, and supportive resources, should build on, from, and with explicit instruction grounded in concepts within an oppression lens, to avoid a diversity approach to a social justice curriculum.

**Foster dialogue.** Cultivating dialogue should be at the center of a social justice curriculum, and teachers need to be willing to risk risky conversations. Fostering dialogue can be challenging because student-driven conversations are often unpredictable. Yet the potential for change occurs in spaces where students learn to feel comfortable being vulnerable and learn to challenge topics that they may have considered stable until others brought them into question. Some students in the class identified discussion (small and whole class) as the instructional strategy that made the most substantial impact on the way they thought or felt about a topic, implying that the most useful tool in a transformative model is dialogue. As the findings demonstrated, the students in this study experienced intense emotions and resistance to some of the topics and texts introduced in the social justice curriculum, but ultimately we all learned from the experience of engaging with social justice topics, and much of this learning was the result of dialogue. While it often created tension, dialogue also provided opportunities for confronting that tension. Throughout the semester, the participants and I discovered new ideas about ourselves and our worlds, which speaks to the power and potential of dialogue. To encourage dialogue in the classroom teachers can:

- Create discourse rules *with* students to guide dialogue.
- Model appropriate discourse behaviors in small and whole class discussions.
- Reflect on the use of discourse rules, recognizing progress and setting goals for improvement.
• Record observations of student interactions in small group and whole class discussions, using the observations to plan mini-lessons to improve dialogue in areas that students’ are struggling.

**Encourage inquiry and a critical eye.** As students engaged in inquiry activities in this study, they increased their content knowledge and deepened their understanding about gender and LGBTQQ issues. Because our individual beliefs, ideas, and knowledge change daily when we encounter new ideas in texts and through interpersonal relationships, teachers need to encourage an inquiry stance. Lindfors (1999) writes that the “text and context continually create each other” (p. 12), and through inquiry these recreations may become visible. This was true of the students in this study. As they engaged with texts throughout the semester, their beliefs and knowledge were continually re-created.

If teachers want to combat heteronormativity and homophobia, inquiry in conjunction with helping students develop a critical eye (paying attention to dominant voices, missing voices, issues of privilege and oppression) can be invaluable instructional tools to use in a social justice curriculum. The findings in this study suggest using a variety of open and fixed inquiry activities, while guiding students to take a critical stance, can increase content knowledge and move students beyond surface level analyses of topics. Fixed inquiry assignments were highly structured tasks that required students to answer specific content-building questions, create a product that developed important concepts in the curriculum, or complete a teacher assigned task requiring a particular formula. Fixed inquiry guided most students in understanding specific principles and concepts, which were important to a critical understanding of power, privilege, and
oppression. On the other hand, I framed open inquiry experiences around a loosely
structured task. These tasks allowed students to use their own questions, responses, and
queries to approach a teacher-chosen text. They guided students’ meaningful
conversations, produced more questions, challenged their beliefs, and encouraged
changes in their attitudes or knowledge.

As seen in the findings of this study, the in-depth study of sexuality generated a
new awareness of LGBTQ issues, which in some cases developed student agency or
affirmed their commitment to an ally stance. For that reason, incorporating fixed and
open inquiry is a key component to assisting students in engaging in a social justice
curriculum. The following list of suggestions may be helpful for teachers interested in
incorporating inquiry activities in their classroom:

- Choose a social justice concept or topic that students are interested in or see as a
  problem in their community.
- Develop fixed inquiry questions or activities that connect students’ lived
  experience to the topic or concept.
- Locate texts that provide a range of perspectives on the topic or concept, seeking
  out texts that challenge mainstream views or that will expand the current
  knowledge or views that students’ hold, paying specific attention to content,
  format, and accessibility.
- Provide time for open inquiry by allowing students to delve into the texts in small
  and whole class discussions.
• Give students an opportunity to share, in a variety of formats (orally, written, visually), findings from their discussion to synthesize their ideas as well as provide another opportunity to learn with and from each other.

• Teach students the meaning of a critical eye so that they become adept and recognizing, through their inquiries, when voices are missing, dominate, are privileged or oppressed.

Seek Supportive Resources for Students

Seeking texts that support critical inquiry is crucial to engaging students in dialogue and investigating social justice topics. Leland, Lewison, and Harste (2013) suggest using: “varied sources of information (books, magazines, newspapers, videos, graphic novels, TV clips, YouTube videos, etc.) that provide alternative perspectives and create opportunities for complex connections” (p. 112). Choosing texts from a variety of sources, especially texts that contain current real-world problems, allows students to move “beyond the school walls and encourage them to deal with social, political, or community issues” (Leland, Lewison, and Harste, 2013, p. 112). In this study I found that non-fiction articles, informational videos, speeches, and media were effective in engaging students in critical inquiry.

Non-fiction articles. Some students in the study identified articles as an important source of information that assisted in the Transforming process. The two non-fiction articles that generated the most engagement during discussion was “The Transgender Athlete” (Ridley, 2012) and “Lucky Boy” (Roberts, 2012). These articles produced animated written responses and provoked lively discussion that encouraged students to identify contradictions in their beliefs and identify unconscious normalized
assumptions. Based on the success of these two articles, teachers should choose non-fiction articles that are current, short, easy to read, and contain real-world problems. Teachers can easily access non-fiction articles online from any newspaper. Compiling a list of relevant social justice articles by perusing local and national newspapers is an easy way to create an invaluable source of up to date information for students.

**Informational videos.** Hank Green’s *Human Sexuality is Complicated* (2013) was an informational video and another source that many students in the study identified as significant to increasing their knowledge about sexuality and gender. Informational videos are effective in building background knowledge for difficult concepts as well as beneficial for building content knowledge. Videos are also easily accessible to a group of students with a wide range of literacy abilities and often keep them engaged because of the combination of visual and oral delivery of information. There are a number of individuals, including Hank Green, who create videos explaining current topics of interest from unique perspectives. Teachers with access to YouTube can locate a number of informational videos that engage students, while increasing knowledge about the topic under investigation.

**Speeches.** Some students in the study distinguished iO Tillet Wright’s speech as an impetus for change in their conception about sexuality. Speeches are a unique combination of storytelling, informative communication, and persuasive speaking. iO Tillet Wright uses storytelling techniques to describe her life as a gender nonconforming individual wrestling with her sexuality, informing the audience about her photography project, and persuading the audience to contemplate gender binaries. Speeches are an exceptional resource for teachers to access and use with students. Fortunately, speech
videos are easy to access online. Ted Talks (www.ted.com) offers an exceptional source for speeches that cover a range of topics from varying stances.

**Media.** Another source that many students recognized as crucial to their understanding about sexuality and derogatory language that often accompanies discussions of LGBTQQ individuals was a compilation of *Think B4 You Speak* (2008) commercials. The short videos used contemporary actors and actresses, addressed a relevant topic, kept students engaged, and enabled them to critically investigate how sexuality and language functioned together in the real-world. It is vital for students to critically investigate their repetitive exposure to manufactured media messages, which is one way that normalized assumptions are internalized. Teachers can access a variety of commercials and other media online, and in conjunction with dialogue and critical-inquiry, analyze the ways in which the commercials violate or perpetuate societal norms relating to the social justice topic under investigation.

There is a variety of sources available to teachers choosing texts for a social justice curriculum. I suggest creating a list of criteria to evaluate each source to assist in choosing high quality texts for instruction. The criteria list should be specific to the individual teacher, classroom, and the content. The following list is an example of the criteria list I created to guide my text selection during the sexuality unit:

- Avoids victim profile
- Positions LGBTQQ individuals as agentive
- Accessible/relevant to students
- Contradicts mainstream views
Develop a Strong Learner’s Stance

Findings from this study lead me to believe that, in order for teachers to successfully adopt a social justice curriculum, we must take on the stance of a learner and facilitator in the classroom. We should be active participants in the classroom as well as facilitators of learning (Dewey, 1938/2004; Freire, 1970). Positioning myself as a learner along with students in an intentionally-created environment where I used co-constructed rules of engagement, incorporated a supportive tone of voice and humor, included personal stories to relate to students, kept it real, modeled vulnerability, and communicated views. This stance engaged students as co-learners who were willing to take risks in their learning. It was also helpful when students expressed their dissonance vehemently when confronting oppression or their unconscious role in it. This study taught me that, when teachers take a stance as learners and allow students to experience and share their feelings in a safe environment, the potential to alter oppressive discourse and encourage the development of allies against injustice increases. How teachers approach students is often more important than what they are saying. Teachers are in a unique position to combat homophobia and improve the school environment at the classroom level by engaging in discussions about LGBTQQ topics and challenging stereotypes but the approach they take is critical. Along with making visible my learner’s stance, my sense of humor (keeping it real), and attempting to avoid indoctrination, I found that, my willingness to walk with the students meant that they were more likely to take risks in their own self-reflections.

Developing this kind of stance involves learning from other educators. As we consider the vulnerability of taking a stand, it is important that we work strategically,
drawing from the experience and wisdom of others. Table 5.2 includes the resources I used to develop my stance as a teacher-learner and that encouraged me to take action by incorporating LGBTQ topics in my curricula.

**Utilize the Cycle of Transformation in Social Justice Education Model**

Teachers interested in social justice issues can use this study to extend their understanding of the process that many of the students experienced within The Cycle of Transformation in Social Justice Education (CTSJE) model that I developed as a result of this study. This process includes: *Engaging, Becoming, and Transforming*. The CTSJE model provides teachers with a conceptual understanding of how some students may react to a social justice curriculum. Teachers can use this model to prepare content, strategies, and activities that support each stage of the model in order to move students toward *Transforming*. For example, when my students were in the *Engaging* phase we read “Lucky Boy” (Roberts, 2012) because it encouraged discussion and stimulated initial forays into identifying gender concepts. While they were in the *Becoming* part of the model, I provided them with the Gender Terms Activity (Appendix L) and Privilege of Being Gender Conforming lesson (Appendix O) to assist in the uncovering their normalized beliefs. While they were in *Transforming* part of the model, I recognized that Socratic circles and open inquiry that challenged their common sense view of the world would serve their learning more completely.

The CTSJE model also gives teachers an awareness of possible reactions and tensions that students may experience as they go through the *Engaging, Becoming, and Transforming* processes. They can prepare students and the classroom environment by, for example, establishing dialogue rules and goals and discussing internal conflicts.
through dialogue or writing instead of ignoring tensions. Teachers can provide space and time for reflection on challenging topics through writing, giving students the means to express their emotions on paper and allowing them to be open and honest without fear of being judged. The model also serves teachers. They can be proactive toward their teaching by establishing a process for dealing with controversy with students, pre-planning responses to student dissent, and including time for constant reflection on observations and interactions.

**Intentionally Contradict the LGBTQQ Victim Profile**

At times, the students and I perpetuated and interrupted homophobic beliefs, heteronormative views, and victim stance of LGBTQQ individuals. In the midst of discussion and activities, there were times I failed to thwart students’ oppressive discourse. And yet, there were other instances where students themselves interrupted oppressive dialogue. This illustrates the necessity for teachers to strive to interrupt the victim profile of LGBTQQ individuals perpetuated in student discussions, as well as constantly observe, reflect, and interrupt oppressive literacy practices.

One of the purposes of the study was to interrupt the victim profile of LGBTQQ individuals; unfortunately, even though some students expressed acceptance and agency, they continued to regard LGBTQQ individuals as victims, a key limitation of the curriculum. The purposefully-chosen texts failed to contradict student views that LGBTQQ individuals needed sympathy or pity. Prior to this study, most students had not been exposed to instruction about sexuality; especially instruction that positioned LGBTQQ people in positive ways. Recent research suggests that attention to LGBTQQ students as victims of bullying, harassment, suicide, and academically at-risk individuals
has increased interventions for LGBTQ students but has also preemptively defined those individuals as needing sympathy, protection, and guidance to avoid high risk behaviors (Kosciw, 2010; Talburt, 2004). Talburt (2004) problematized common school practices for LGBTQ youth: “Even as these interventions create openings, implicit in their underlying assumptions are narrow norms of who LGBT youth are and what they need” (p. 119). This suggests that all school personnel that work with LGBTQ youth must be reflective about how they position LGBTQ students, being responsive to their needs while avoiding labels that may increase the victim profile.

It is apparent from the findings of this study that students need to be exposed to multiple and various experiences with positive portrayals of LGBTQ individuals through multiple print and non-print texts and classroom experiences. I believe it is necessary for teachers to continually present the accomplishments of LGBTQ people in the context of all content areas. Literature concerning LGBTQ inclusive curricula posits the importance and necessity of including LGBTQ topics, especially positive representations, in classrooms (Blackburn and Buckley, 2005; Lipkin, 2004).

**Take Care Not to Replicate Oppressive Practices in the Classroom**

Throughout the study, I observed students using literacy practices in a variety of ways, and manifested within those practices (sometimes unintentionally, sometimes intentionally) was oppression. As a teacher-learner, I had to recognize and find ways to lessen oppressive practices while encouraging dialogue. For instance, throughout the study, Greg rejected gender nonconforming and LGBTQ individuals, which oppressed Noah’s lesbian identity (personal communication). Although I encouraged students’ open and honest communication about the topics we discussed, his literacy practices
subjugated gender nonconforming and LGBTQQQ individuals, subordinating Noah’s LGBTQQQ identity. Unfortunately, his literacy practices reified the oppression LGBTQQQ individuals experience in schools and other institutions (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Kosciw, 2010). It became apparent to me that I needed to create opportunities for students to interrogate the relationship between privilege and power and engage in dialogue about these concepts in order to begin to resist unacknowledged oppressive practices. Thus, as teachers reflect on their stance within the classroom environment, they must also consider the literacy practices of their students and how oppression that occurs in society may at times be replicated in the classroom.

**Increase and vary experiences.** The findings from this study suggest that the students did not see the connection between personal beliefs (homophobia), institutional rules and policies (heteronormativity), and oppression of LGBTQQQ individuals. Different strategies and more experience with these concepts and opportunities to draw these connections might deepen students’ understanding of the oppression that LGBTQQQ students experience. Blazar (2009) and Zanitsch (2009) propose utilizing dramatizations and role-play with students to engage them in discussion about LGBTQQQ topics. Dramatizations and role-plays offer a way for students to try on multiple perspectives and move past their own personal experiences. Teachers who embed their instruction in an oppression lens should provide multiple opportunities and various experiences with the concepts of power, privilege, and oppression to deepen students’ understanding.

**Take a Stand**

Prior to and during the implementation of the social justice curriculum I experienced conflicted feelings about discussing sexuality in my classroom. My research
journal served as a constant source of reflection that enabled me to record and move beyond the challenges I experienced. The reflections and action research methodology allowed me to better understand my internal conflicts, improve my teaching and myself and become a better activist and ally. I realized how important it was for me and my students to take a stand to initiate change in my classroom and school.

Teachers who also feel tentative about taking a stand to incorporate LGBTQ inclusive curricula can address fears strategically through preparation, documentation, collegial support, and balance. In addition, teachers who are ready to take a stand can use action research to transform their classrooms and school, identify as an activist, take risks, avoid assumptions, and resist hate and homophobia. Being a teacher-researcher led to my own transformation process (discussed in Chapter IV), which led to my agency as an ally and activist in my school and community. Believing in the urgency of addressing heteronormativity and homophobia in schools because of the negative impact on LGBTQ and gender nonconforming youth, I share the following suggestions for other teachers as they seek advice and support for taking a stand.

Prepare. Creating and implementing a social justice curriculum was a gradual process that began in the fall, 2012, semester with the inclusion of social justice articles on a variety of topics that the students and I read and discussed. I gathered feedback from students and reviewed my reflections on my teaching, I vigorously read about teaching social justice classes, which led to the implementation of the curriculum that was presented in this dissertation. I prepared to teach the social justice curriculum by immersing myself in current research, which allowed me to provide content knowledge to students that expanded their current views. Reading deeply in the field allowed me to
confidently answer questions and portray myself as a learner who was constantly immersed in continued reading about the issues related to LBGTQQ topics. This is an essential component of social justice teaching and foundational to successful teaching – preparing by becoming knowledgeable.

Another way that I prepared to teach the social justice curriculum was by researching how other teachers successfully implemented a social justice curriculum, specifically looking at text choices, approaches, (previously discussed) and ways to address challenges. Bell (2007) offered a framework for facilitating a social justice course, which I found helpful to create my curriculum and to preventatively address challenges:

1. Establish an equilibrium between the emotional and cognitive components of the learning process.

2. Acknowledge and support the personal and individual dimensions of experience, while making connections to and illuminating the systemic dimensions of social group interactions.

3. Pay explicit attention to social relations within the classroom.

4. Make conscious use of reflection and experience as tools for student-centered learning.

5. Reward changes in awareness, personal growth, and efforts to work toward change, understood as outcomes of the learning process. (p. 15)

This list is a useful guide in planning a social justice curricula and anticipating challenges that may occur in the classroom.
Document. Beginning with the pilot study, I obtained approval from my school district and from my university’s Internal Review Board (Appendix D, E, F). I obtained approval from my principal to conduct both studies, informing him about the content of my class. In addition, I reviewed the content and expectations with students verbally and with students and parents through a consent form (Appendix B). I believe documenting the content of the study, written and oral, created a foundation for reaffirming to students and parents that the content was appropriate for our classroom. For example, when a student commented, “Why are we even talking about gay people?” oftentimes I did not even have to respond because another student would explain, “Because they experience injustices all the time, which is what we are learning about.” Documenting the study, especially with students, was a vital way that I pacified my own fears about incorporating sexuality into the curricula.

Seek collegial support. Another way that I found strength to take a stand was through the constant support of my colleagues. A brief glimpse at my researcher’s journal reveals the recurring discussions I had with like-minded peers. These discussions often provided emotional support as I encountered student resistance or a safe place to share frustrations about uninformed student responses to the content in the class. I suggest finding a group of individuals who support social justice work and will encourage your efforts. Collegial support is critical for social justice educators in schools, like mine, where institutional support is absent. Their words of wisdom, emotional support, and encouragement can make a difference in how you ultimately approach your students and teaching, because they are your sounding board and outlet to share disappointments and successes.
My colleagues offered camaraderie as I challenged the institutional silence of LGBTQQ topics in my classroom. Initially, my like-minded peers were supportive of the work I was doing in my classroom, but refrained from incorporating those topics in their own classrooms. Fortunately, as time has lapsed, more of my colleagues have sought me out for assistance in negotiating the integration of LGBTQQ topics into their curriculum.

**Identify as an activist.** There are a variety of ways that teachers can assert themselves as activists in their schools and communities as they take a stand. For example, I displayed the books I was reading about gender and sexuality and I shared pieces of my writing with my students. Disclosing my dissertation work identified me as an activist for equity. Singer and Shagoury (2005) affirm the success of this strategy as they shared their reading and writing with their students as part of a unit called *Stirring Up Justice*. They noted the importance of modeling activism for their students:

> We feel that our role as writers and activists was a crucial element in the teaching of this unit. As members of the classroom community, in addition to sharing our processes as writers, it was equally important that we shared our own lives as activists. (Singer and Shagoury, 2005, p. 387)

Teachers can model their own literacy practices as evidence of activism, promoting activism in their students’ lives.

Another way that I established myself as an activist was by mentoring the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) in my school. My name and room number were clearly displayed on the daily announcements with the GSA meeting dates. Through mentoring the GSA I was able to identify myself as an ally and an activist. This enabled students and teachers to seek me out for questions and assistance, also enabling us to establish
relationships and a safe space for dialogue. Roy (1997) shared similar results from his social justice classroom work:

> Since the work of my classroom is public, other teachers seek me out with questions or requests for material or ideas. In this way, I have also built quiet coalitions with colleagues who want to take small steps toward change. (p. 217)

I found that by explicitly sharing the ways that I was an activist, I was able to clarify misunderstandings about the GSA, sexuality, and gender conformity. Students and teachers sought me out to share stories, find resources, and promote working for change.

**Take risks and do not assume.** Many teachers, including myself, fear parental resistance and even losing our jobs for discussing sexuality in the classroom (Thein, 2013). This study proved to me that many of my fears were unsubstantiated. Some parents expressed their opposition to the texts we discussed in class in written responses to the articles. The parents wrote responses which were part of the students’ homework (Appendix J). Ultimately, the parents did not contest the social justice curriculum by disputing its inclusion with me or administration. Sieben and Wallowitz’s (2009) study affirms my findings in their description of a first year teacher including queer theory in her English Language Arts class. The teacher wrote:

> I refused to play it “safe” by remaining silent about issues of sexuality. At the end of the year, my English language arts director noted that even though I had taught queer theory in my classroom, he did not receive a single parental complaint about me. He complimented my open approach to this topic and reported that he had heard my students share our classroom discussion in other classes….Teachers who fear repercussions for teaching an LGBT curriculum may
assume their students’ parents to be closed-minded. While this may be true of some parents, we could also assume that other parents (and administrators) can be our allies and support us. (p. 48-49)

My advice is to take risks, address challenges preemptively and as they occur.

- Talk to your administrators about texts and content that you want to include in your curricula.
- Ground your instruction in the standards or any other guidelines for course content provided by your school.
- Send newsletters to parents keeping them updated on what you are studying with your students.
- Communicate the goals, purpose, and intent behind your instructional choices with students.

In addition, do not assume that you are alone; there are administrators, colleagues, parents, and students that consider social justice education a beneficial and vital part of school. Talk to your administrators about what you want to teach, talk to your colleagues about what is happening in your classroom, talk to the parents of your students about your goals for instruction, and talk to your students about what you are teaching.

Communication about the goals, purposes, and benefits of social justice education will help you find and build a faction of social justice education supporters.

**Confront fears.** When I obtained approval for this study, I framed the study around the investigation of critical literacy within a social justice curriculum, but I did not include the social justice topics that I intended to examine with students. The semester following data collection, I applied for movie approval of *The Times of Harvey*
Milk documentary (Epstein, 1984) and was denied approval because the content was too mature for my students. I attempted to persuade my administrator of the value in the documentary and it’s purpose within my curriculum, which resulted in her asking that I remove the entire social justice curriculum from my public speaking class, suggesting that I focus on the intent of the course, which is sound communication skills and expression. I also met with a school district representative who could not offer approval without the support of my administration. I stopped teaching the social justice curriculum the semester following data collection for this dissertation study. I found alternative ways to incorporate critical discussions around the texts I used as models in the genre study of my public speaking curriculum, although they were not grounded in the investigation of the oppression cycle. Offering students the opportunity to choose their own topics and through teachable moments in the class I continue to contest the oppression of LGBTQ and nongender conforming students.

I included this section, not to exacerbate the fears that many teachers already have or to prove that most teachers teach in inhospitable places for LGBTQ inclusive curricula, but to model how to contest fears, personal and institutional. As disappointed as I was when I had to stop teaching my social justice curriculum, I found strength in confronting my fears. My fears were no longer speculative, which led me to find alternative ways to subvert and resist the suppression of LGBTQ inclusive curricula.

**Resist.** Implementation of an LGBTQ curriculum may meet with resistance in some schools, but I suggest resisting resistance. Kohl (1998) suggests resisting in the following ways:
Resist in as creative a way as you can, through humor, developing and using alternatives, and organizing for social and educational change with others who feel as you do. Don’t become isolated or alone in your efforts. Reach out to other teachers, to community leaders, church people, parents. Try to survive, but don’t make your survival in a particular job the overriding determinant of what you will or won’t do. Find a school where you can do your work, risk getting fired and stand up for the quality of your work. Don’t quit in the face of opposition: make people work hard if they intend to fire you for teaching equity and justice. (p. 286)

Although I am aware that my administration is not supportive of LGBTQQ inclusive curricula, I continue to allow students to choose their own topics for student speeches, which often include LGBTQQ topics. I also choose texts and models that lend themselves to conversations about LGBTQQ topics and oppression. I will continue to contest the silence in my own school through conversations with administration, guidance, and my colleagues. I encourage other teachers to do the same. Resist the silence. Resist the oppressive discourse imposed by the unsupportive administration. Resist the temptation to stop fighting for justice.

**Find balance.** One final issue necessary for teachers to consider as they address the challenges and difficult work of social justice teaching is to balance the work of the classroom with taking care of yourself. Kohl (1998) offers the following advice:

Protect and nurture yourself, have some fun in your life, learn new things that only obliquely relate to issues of social justice…..Don’t turn teaching for social
justice into a grim responsibility but take it for the moral and social necessity that it is. And don’t be afraid to struggle for what you believe. (p. 287)

It is easy to become overwhelmed and frustrated by the obstacles, making it necessary to take care of yourself in order to continue the important work of social justice education. Find a way to relieve stress, relax, and have fun. And keep fighting for what you believe.

**Critical Action Research: My Personal Action Plan.**

As described in Chapter III, critical action research allows teachers to examine their own practice with a specific focus on social justice issues. Critical action research enhanced my understanding of my teaching, my students’ learning and classroom dynamics, highlighting the beneficial use of critical action research methodology for teachers. Critical action research serves as a methodology and practice for teachers to construct their own knowledge about teaching and learning. Critical action research also complemented the oppression lens I used to guide this study, which integrated into the reflection, action, reflection, re-planning cycle. The findings from this study were especially important to me as a teacher because they helped me understand student responses to my curriculum and build on these new understandings, thus improving my teaching. I would not have come to these understandings and findings without the in-depth analysis of data, a central component of action research. Using critical action research advanced my curriculum, improved my teaching to better meet the needs of my students, achieved the goals I set for my curriculum, and solidified my ambition as a teacher.

Many teachers monitor and modify their teaching year to year to increase positive results, but fail to do so in a systematic and intentional way by collecting and analyzing
data and writing about their findings. Critical action research offers teachers a feasible way to improve their teaching, immerse themselves in the literature regarding the phenomena they are studying and enhance their results beyond their own classrooms. While the benefits of critical action research are of great consequence to the teacher, they also need to be made public and shared with other educators or as Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh (1993) argued, with policy makers. They wrote, “Teachers would strengthen their ability to shape educational policy to improve conditions in schools if their voices were more often heard presenting well-argued reports on professional matters” (p. 177).

If teachers use critical action research in their practice, their findings have the potential to effect policy development (a beneficial use of research to support legislative changes discussed previously) beyond the individual teacher’s classroom, improving the climate at the school and school district level. Finally, because critical action research distinguishes itself as a cyclical process, with the result being a plan for continued action, the following section outlines the personal action plan that is the result of this study.

As a result of this study, my teaching is informed in a variety of ways. This section reviews my action plan for my work as a professional educator in the future. This plan is built on the notion that curriculum is not stagnant; it should change in the moment while it is being used based on the interactions with students, and it should change across time, based on what the teacher learns from using the curriculum. Because I took a stance as a critical action researcher, the curriculum that I used for the study changed multiple times as I shaped and re-shaped it based on the knowledge that I gained through reading and research, conducting studies in my class, observations and discussions with students, and adaptations to my changing individual goals. It became a living and
malleable document that changed based on my learning and the learning of the students. Based on the findings of this study there are four major changes to the social justice curriculum that I will incorporate next semester: using generative themes, addressing multiple viewpoints, increasing focus on agency, and setting clear expectations for discussion.

Using Generative Themes

A generative theme originates from students’ lived experience; they are topics, issues, and problems that have personal meaning and significance in students’ own lives. Freire (1970) stated: “To investigate the generative theme is to investigate people’s thinking about reality and people’s action upon reality, which is their praxis” (p. 106). The benefit of a generative curriculum is that students use their lived experiences to take action and transform the world they live in. I found that some students struggled to engage in the curriculum when topics and texts were chosen by me. They failed to make connections to their own lives, and I realized that it would be important for students to have more control over the curriculum than they did previously. To create such opportunities, this year I will invite them to discuss social justice issues relevant to their worlds, generating themes that are personally significant which I will incorporate into half of the social justice curriculum (Freire, 1970). After a preliminary introduction to social justice, power, privilege, and oppression through discussion and activities, I will have students brainstorm a list of topics or problems that they believe are significant in their lives. I will compile the list, share it with the students, and we will determine as a class their top two themes of interest. I plan to begin the year with a study of gender using a critical stance and then move into a topic generated by student interest. Then I
plan to move into the sexuality unit, addressing LGBTQ issues, followed by another topic generated by student interest. Within each social justice unit, teacher-chosen and student-chosen, students will explore the concepts of power, privilege, oppression, and agency using a critical inquiry lens. Hopefully, by using student generated themes, more students will be motivated to engage in the reading and discussions.

**Drawing on Multiple Viewpoints**

Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) advocate interrogating multiple perspectives because it complicates what students already know and often “involves the representation of people who have traditionally not been prominent in school curricula” (p. 97). Foundational to critically examining LGBTQ issues is complicating what students’ already know, and this study revealed that students’ knowledge base about LGBTQ issues was rife with misunderstandings. Investigating various aspects of a topic or issue, especially from perspectives of marginalized groups that may contradict students’ initial understandings, would enrich and expand the topics we study. Researching and reviewing the multiple perspectives on each topic will expand students’ knowledge as well as compel students to address inconsistencies between information. For example, the Respect-For-All Project created by GroundSpark (2008) offers helpful advice to teachers to address multiple viewpoints that oppose LGBTQ inclusion:

> Students can respectfully express their disagreement with an idea or concept during classroom instruction without fear of recourse from the school or school district. However, that expression must be respectful and must not violate the safety of another student in the process.
When the texts or other students present contradictory information or conflicting views on the perspectives that are offered, teachers must be prepared to assist students in navigating those multiple perspectives. The consistent and repetitive focus on using discourse rules and goals to express opinions in ways that promote discussion in combination with monitoring small and whole class conversations are the two strategies that I used and will continue to use to attend to students who resist LGBTQQ inclusion.

**Increasing the Focus on Agency**

Agency is when individuals or groups of individuals believe that they have the ability to take action. The findings from this study illustrated that despite my efforts to provide alternative viewpoints of LGBTQQ people, many students continued to view them as victims. This finding was key and exposed the need for me to design curriculum and include instructional strategies that would represent them as individuals with agency. Research suggests that LGBTQQ students must have positive portrayals of LGBTQQ individuals to combat that victim identity and sense of aloneness they feel as a result of their same-sex attraction (Blackburn, 2012; Kosciw, 2010). Therefore, the last addition to the curriculum I want to implement is a focus on agency. Unfortunately, in this study, I did not expose students to leaders who were agentic in their demand for change and equality. However in future classes, I want to introduce students to people who are agents of change. For example, I will continue to work with administration so that I can show Harvey Milk’s documentary (1984) to my class to portray an open and positive LGBTQQ political leader, so that students can learn from people who take action on a daily basis and are agents of change in their lives and the lives of others. I will continue to show iO Tillet Wright’s speech *50 Shades of Gay* (2013), highlighting her agency. In
addition, I will use explicit instruction to discuss agency in the lives of the LGBTQQ individuals in the curriculum in an effort to combat the victim profile and to encourage students own agency. Hopefully, positioning LGBTQQ individuals as agents of change will motivate students to take action against inequalities in their own lives.

**Setting Clear Expectations for Discussion**

Throughout the semester, there were times that students avoided discussion of oppression and focused on corporeal topics. Our classroom dialogue seemed to be an uneasy and precarious balance between clarifying student misconceptions, satisfying their curiosity and returning the discussion to the challenging topic of oppression. I felt that I missed opportunities for returning the conversation to oppression when students were off topic. In the future, I need to prepare myself for this kind of obfuscation, planning ahead language that will redirect students back to the topic of oppression. Additionally, I will provide background information for the students about oppression before it takes place, followed by clear limitations for students regarding each topic. I will:

- Model appropriate discourse.
- Focus on discussion skill building by having students practice listening carefully to each other and building on each other’s talk.
- Conduct anticipation activities asking students to write questions about the topic we are studying to prepare specific background information to reduce confusion that led to off topic discussion.
- Set a clear focus for the discussion, related to oppression, power, and agency.
Implications for Institutional Change at School and School District Levels

In addition classroom changes, if we are to improve the school climate and academic achievement for LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students, educational institutions (schools and school districts) must initiate change and indicate their support of teachers by providing continuous professional development opportunities. We know from a wide range of studies that found that “both continuous education and supportive administration were key components to sustaining change” (Szalacha, 2004, p. 74). This was corroborated in this study. Through my own professional development inquiry into LGBTQ topics, I was able to prepare, deliver, and alter instruction that led to students’ increased knowledge and decreased negative views about LGBTQ individuals. This leads to the suggestion that if educational institutions are to strive for equity, they must provide administrative support and professional development about LGBTQ issues for teachers.

Demonstrate Administrative Support

As noted previously, the students in this study became aware of the silence of teachers surrounding sexuality, which indicated to them a lack of support from their teachers and their administration. School administrators, through individual and collective actions, convey to students and teachers their support or lack of support addressing sexual diversity in school. As a survey conducted by GLSEN (2012) found, supportive school administrators who positioned themselves as caring adults, supported LGBTQ inclusive policies and programs, and demonstrated a willingness to support LGBTQ individuals, can lead the way to a positive school climate through decreased homophobia and increased tolerance in schools. The survey reported:
As the leaders of the school, school administrators may play a particularly important role in the school experiences of LGBT youth. They may serve not only as caring adults to whom the youth can turn, but they also set the tone of the school and determine specific policies and programs that may affect the school’s climate. Approximately one in three students (31.6%) reported that their school administration (e.g., principal, vice-principal) was supportive of LGBT students, and about a third (32.2%) said their administration was unsupportive. (p. 48)

Specifically in terms of LGBTQQ issues, Griffin and Ouelett (2002) found the following administrative actions crucial to creating an LGBTQQ inclusive school environment:

The active support of key administrators (i.e., principals, district superintendants and school committees) was crucial to the success and sustained presence of safe schools initiatives. “Support” ranged widely from public statements or actions by administrators to a perceived willingness of superintendants and school committees to sign off on safe school efforts, support the principal, and not to block change efforts. Unanimously, study participants identified the active support of the school principal as the most important factor that made decisions “stick.” Principals could also grant release time for staff and students to attend out-of-school SSP events and enforce student discipline codes for anti-gay harassment in the school. Additionally, principals play a crucial role responding to and diffusing criticism from parents who resist the presence of a GSA in the school. (p. 4)
Many teachers wish to support the diverse population they teach, but they fail to include LGBTQQ topics in their curricula fearing they will lose their job or that administration will not support them (Clark and Blackburn, 2009; Curwood, Schliesman and Horning, 2009; Daniel, 2007, Dessel, 2010; Smolkin and Young, 2011; Thein, 2013). If administration explicitly addresses sexuality as part of a diverse student body, teachers may feel more confident addressing LGBTQQ topics in their classrooms. Additionally, if school administrators take action on these beliefs, aiding teachers in improving their own instruction through professional development or teacher-led inquiry groups, they would also be taking a firm step forward in improving the school climate for LGBTQQ students.

**Support and Engage in Professional Development**

Professional development provided by the school and/or school system is a key component to reshaping schools into spaces that openly accept LGBTQQ people and prepare teachers for LGBTQQ inclusive curricula. Szalacha (2004) found that schools where teachers attended some type of professional development to inform them more deeply about LGBTQQ students and related issues were “more positive ‘sexual diversity climates’ (greater tolerance, lower sexual prejudice)” (p. 74). Training all school personnel is also important to give teachers skills needed to “assist students who are struggling with their or another’s sexual orientation or gender identity/expression” (Cahill and Cianciotto, 2004, p. 10).

One often over-looked resource that schools can employ to aid professional development is the local LGBTQQ community. Dessel (2010) found that:

Teacher participants in the intergroup dialogues [between teachers and members of a local LGBTQQ community group] showed a statistically significant positive
change from pre to posttest on variables of civil rights, feelings about gays, feelings about lesbians, perspective taking, and behavior. (p. 572)

Using local resources to support teachers, along with administrative support, can aid teachers in developing and understanding sexual diversity and how to address it in school.

There are plentiful resources available when school administration makes a choice to prepare teachers for addressing the diversity that exists in their schools. For example, book clubs can assist teachers in developing their knowledge of LGBTQ issues. Parker and Bach (2009) used book clubs about transgender youth to advance teachers’ understanding about transgender and gender nonconforming identities, which provided a way for teachers to confront people that were different from themselves. Table 5.2 lists the resources I used to build my knowledge about teaching LGBTQ issues as I created my curriculum and could also serve as an exemplar of texts that could be used in teacher book clubs.

In addition, staff development models such as curricula produced by Groundspark (visit www.groundspark.org for more information), the Safe Schools Programs (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2009; The Respect-For-All Project: GroundSpark, 2008), and GLSEN (www.glsen.org) could be included in professional development plans. Groundspark is an organization that creates social justice films and educational campaigns to support schools and communities toward action against injustice. Safe Schools programs focus on anti-bullying policies, professional development, and student education, and resources created by GLSEN place an emphasis on LGBTQ advocacy through education for administrators, teachers, and
Table 5.2

Resources for Building Teacher Knowledge and Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LGBTQQ Literature and Resources for additional literature</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brent Hartinger</td>
<td>Geography Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Order of the Poison Oak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Boy Meets Boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>David Levithan</td>
<td>The Realm of Possibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wide Awake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alex Sanchez</td>
<td>Will Grayson, Will Grayson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(with John Green)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Love is the Higher Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Letcher (2009)</td>
<td>Rainbow Boys</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rainbow High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rainbow Road</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Getting It</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Boyfriends with Girlfriends</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Off the Shelves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fausto-Sterling (2000)</td>
<td>Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thomas and Levin (2009)</td>
<td>Sexual Orientation and Human Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rofes (2005)</td>
<td>Status Quo or Status Queer?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBTQQ Teaching Articles and Books</td>
<td>Clark and Blackburn (2009)</td>
<td>Reading LGBT-Themed Literature with Young People: What’s Possible?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blackburn (2012)</td>
<td>Interrupting Hate: Homophobia in Schools and What Literacy Can Do About It</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
students. These kinds of programs, already available to schools and districts through national organizations, are effective methods of providing professional development to teachers.

**Prepare an Inclusive School Setting**

Currently there are a number of programs that not only include professional development for teachers to prepare them for teaching LGBTQ inclusive curricula, but also prepare the school setting (Glasgow, 2003; Griffin and Ouelett, 2002; Uribe, 1994). Administration can use these successful programs as models to develop a school environment and curricula that are LGBTQ inclusive. These programs focus on elements such as: developing positive school climates, advocating for policy changes, support groups, teacher training, and community involvement. For example, Project 10, a high school based program, established in Los Angeles in 1984, used the following core components to reduce bias and discrimination, improve school climate, and support individuals in school settings (Glasgow, 2003; Uribe, 1994): workshops for teachers, counselors, and other support personnel and support groups for students on campus addressing sexual orientation (Uribe, 1994). The program accomplishments included:

  Testimonials from the students themselves [that] indicated that the support groups were valuable and empowering for them. Success was also measured in terms of improved attendance and academic performance, improved relationships with primary family members, and by the number of males who agreed to attend AIDS education programs sponsored by local human service organizations. (Uribe, 1994, p. 170)
Creating safe spaces for students in schools is crucial to support LGBTQQ students’ navigation in what they may perceive as a negative environment (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds, 2002; Ryan, 2003).

Another program, the Safe Haven Project, a school-based bias education program, uses the following key components: peer support group activities, bias prevention education classroom presentations, and sensitivity orientations for teachers, staff, and parents/guardians, and victim services for students (Glasgow, 2003). In addition, a grant from the California Community Foundation’s Fostering Understanding Initiative provided monetary resources to the Safe Haven Project facilitating the creation of four standards-based lessons for each of the following content areas: English, Math, Science, and Social Studies (Glasgow, 2003). Through these practices and curricula, the Safe Haven Project created a safe and inclusive school climate for LGBTQQ and gender nonconforming students. The heteronormative environment of many schools creates a destructive environment for LGBTQQ and gender nonconforming students, limiting academic achievement and perpetuating negative views of LGBTQQ individuals. This successful program is a useful model for schools that want to combat homophobia, heterosexism, discrimination, and bullying of LGBTQQ and non-gender conforming students.

The Massachusetts Safe Schools Program (SSP), heralded for their comprehensive and successful program (Griffin and Ouelett, 2002), contains the following elements specifically addressing sexual orientation: policies, professional training, counseling services, curriculum, and community outreach (Massachusetts
Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2009). The article “Break the Silence” (Bennett, 1997), explains the success of the SSP program in Massachusetts:

In short, Massachusetts is addressing the real school experiences of gay and lesbian youth. "The lesson we have learned is when students have a voice in this, it cuts through the homophobia. It makes teachers realize that these kids are just kids -- like their own kids," says David LaFontaine, chairman of the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth. (p. 1)

Massachusetts’ implementation of their SSP offers a blueprint for other schools to follow. In fact, Safe schools legislation that includes sexual orientation has been passed in a number of other states including California, Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, and New Jersey (The Respect-For-All Project: GroundSpark, 2008).

Provide Resources for LGBTQ-Inclusive Curricula

In addition to preparing the environment for LGBTQ inclusive curricula, administration can support teachers in the creation of a distinct LGBTQ inclusive curricula for their school by providing assistance, time, and resources. My suggestion for administration and teachers is to work closely with students, parents, and the community to create a curriculum that is not just LGBTQ inclusive, but that uses an integrative approach critically investigating the power, privilege, and oppression that exists in society. There are abundant possibilities for inclusion and teachers and administration must decide how and when to incorporate LGBTQ topics in their schools. Using Banks’ (2002) texts, Approaches to Curriculum Reform model which contains four levels: Contributions, Additive, Transformation, and Social Action (discussed in Chapter II), teachers could work toward the social action level to create an LGBTQ inclusive
curricula that develops student agency to contest homophobia and heteronormativity. Lipkin (2004) advocates incorporating biographies of LGBTQQ people, LGBTQQ literature, gay liberation history, math or science problems containing LGBTQQ individuals or topics, LGBTQQ topics for writing, and opportunities for personal writing about sexuality. The following organizations provide ample material for teachers interested in incorporating LGBTQQ topics in their classes: Groundspeak, GLSEN, Teaching Tolerance (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014), and The Southern Poverty Law Center (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014). A list of texts used with students in this study is provided in Appendix A.

**Learn to Deal with Challenges**

I believe the administrator who eradicated my social justice curriculum was under scrutiny from the community because of rumored lawsuits for new grading policies recently adopted by the district. My administrator may have been controlled more by her fears of community and parent resistance then by the research that supports LGBTQQ inclusive curricula. Administrators, challenged by morally-based and faith-based community points of view, often face perceived challenges to creating inclusive school environments with regard to LGBTQQ issues. However, they can learn valuable lessons for addressing these kinds of obstacles from other principals involved with Safe Schools initiatives. Although Griffin and Ouelett’s (2002) study focused on schools supported by Safe Schools legislation, administrators dedicated to reversing a negative school climate for LGBTQQ students can begin by taking a stance and confirming their commitment to equality for all students. School principals not in Safe School Programs can enforce existing harassment rules and policies, provide opportunities for teachers who want to
pursue education about LGBTQ topics, and contest resistance from community members, parents, and teachers by conveying that all students have the right to an equal education without fear of being harassed or hurt because of their sexual orientation. Administrators can also create their own support networks by communicating with administrators struggling with similar challenges or administrators who have overcome challenges to support LGBTQ youth.

**Implications for Legislative Changes**

The findings from this study revealed that many students’ negative attitudes about LGBTQ and gender nonconforming people stemmed from stereotypes and biases grounded in misinformation. However, prior to this study, there were no spaces in the school’s curriculum, a curriculum governed by legislative policy, for students to gain information about sexual orientation and LGBTQ issues. In their public education, the only knowledge students in this study gained about LGBTQ individuals was in their Sexual Education classes (Group one, Sexuality Group Interview, May 21, 2013). The Comprehensive Health Education Act (CHEA) mandates that teachers instruct students that the only acceptable relationships are heterosexual and correlated homosexuality with sexually transmitted infections. I contacted an employee from my state’s Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy to determine if there were plans to revise the policy. The individual responded in an e-mail stating that changes to the CHEA language were suggested, but denied by legislation (personal communication, July 14, 2013).

Based on the findings of this study, I suggest that legislators alter the CHEA policy to be inclusive of sexual diversity. This work cannot be done by teachers alone, legislative backing would also provide support for administrators as they strive to support teachers in creating more equitable educational experiences. In order to sustain change to
improve the school climate for all students, specifically LGBTQQ and non-gender conforming students, action needs to occur at the legislative level: Legislators must make changes to policies that will support educators in combating the homophobia and heteronormativity that threaten opportunities for an equitable education for every student. Findings from this study can be used to encourage stakeholders in education to unite for legislative changes to improve the quality of education for all students, but specifically LGBTQQ students, by campaigning for compulsory modifications to policies and statewide adaptations/resource support of LGBTQQ curricula. In the sections below, I suggest a range of strategies and examples of work currently underway to affect such policy change.

**Access Previous Court Precedents**

Investors in education who are struggling to alter legislation, especially in communities that moralize against it, can use previous court cases to argue for legislative change. For example, in 2006, the U.S. District Court of Massachusetts ruled in favor of a public elementary school that incorporated gay themed literature in the classroom. Two sets of parents sought to prevent the inclusion based on religious and moral grounds. “The court ruled that while parents have a right to direct the upbringing of their children, that right does not extend to directing what a school teaches” (The Respect-For-All Project: GroundSpark, 2008). Promoting changes in legislation grounded in successful court cases is one way to advocate for change.

**Petition Local Government Representatives**

Another way that legislation is changed is through petitioning local government representatives. LGBTQQ equality groups often send out e-mails requesting that citizens
contact specific legislators when legislation is being adopted or amended that violates LGBTQ individual’s rights. Richter (2007), from the University of California Berkley suggests:

Find out which federal Department of Education region you are in and contact your DOE regional representative. This person should be approached as a potential ally and educated on the issues...provide her/him with plenty of the latest and best resources and research.

Join Advocacy Groups

Joining advocacy groups, educating, and contacting local officials responsible for making legislative decisions regarding LGBTQ issues have the potential to change legislative decisions. There are many local LGBTQ equality advocacy groups, but the following national organizations have branches in most areas:

- Gay, Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) - National organization that scrutinizes the media to promote accurate representations of LGBTQ people, reduce discrimination, and educate advocacy leaders to communicate effectively to change inaccurate portrayals of LGBTQ individuals.

- Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) - National organization promoting safe schools for all students, specifically focusing on LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students, by advocating change beginning at the legislative level to individual schools.

- Human Rights Campaign (HRC) - LGBTQ advocacy group that organizes local activism in communities, sponsors election of fair minded officials, and educates the public to enhance the lives of LGBTQ individuals and their families.
• Parents, Family, and Friends of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG) - National organization that uses three primary tools: support, advocacy, and education, to encourage equality and societal acceptance of LGBTQ individuals.

**Advocate for LGBTQQ-inclusive Language in Policies**

One way that states and school districts can develop and enact specific policy change and endorse LGBTQQ friendly schools is by creating new and altering existing policies to include sexual orientation. Without policies to support and acknowledge LGBTQQ students in positive ways, these students remain invisible in our schools creating an oppressive environment and limiting their academic achievement. By using LGBTQQ inclusive language, policies can protect students as well as draw attention to an inclusive atmosphere that portrays a variety of sexual orientations as acceptable (Horn, Szalacha, and Drill, 2008; Lipkin, 2008). Research supports the need to alter current state and local policies that are not LGBTQQ inclusive (Cahill and Cianciotto, 2004; Horn, Szalacha, and Drill, 2008; Lipkin, 2008; Reis, Mendoza, and Takamura, 2003, Ressler and Chase, 2009, Szalacha, 2004), and the Massachusetts Safe Schools Program (SSP), a widely heralded LGBTQQ inclusive program (program specifics discussed in the following section), illustrates possible alternatives in policy language. Griffin and Ouelett (2002) report: “the combined support from statewide legal mandates, policy recommendations, and program assistance from the Massachusetts Department of Education played a crucial role in facilitating organizational change at local levels” (p. 4). Other states can utilize the successful lessons of the SSP implementation in Massachusetts when they establish and revise their current policies.
The Massachusetts Safe School Program uses the following components in their policy revision process:

1. The inclusion of "sexual orientation" as a protected category in nondiscrimination policies, in order to insure the just treatment of lesbian/gay people in the school setting.
2. Policies that protect the rights of teachers to discuss sexuality in an inclusive, accurate, and specific manner.
3. Clear procedures that deal with incidents of homophobic harassment, which include clear definitions and penalties for such behavior.
4. The inclusion of lesbian/gay issues within appropriate diversity or multiculturalism policies.
5. Policies which mandate the delivery of services to lesbian/gay youth and insures equal access to educational opportunity.
6. Policies which reflect the diversity of family structure in a way that does not assume a heterosexist, two-parents-of-the-opposite-sex structure.
7. Clear guidelines for professionals to follow in dealing with anti-gay epithets and speech. (Richter, 2007)

Another helpful example is Framingham Middle School’s sexual harassment policy, which uses the following language in their sexual harassment policy:

The Framingham School Committee is committed to safeguarding the right of all students to learn in an environment that is free from all kinds of sexual harassment. Therefore, the committee condemns and prohibits all unwelcome behavior of a sexual nature because such conduct interferes with school
performance and creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive educational environment. Definition: Unwanted sexual attention from peers, teachers, administrators or anyone you must interact with in order to pursue school activities. Physical or verbal conduct of a sexual nature that makes the environment of Framingham Middle School intimidating, hostile or offensive to the student. Sexual harassment includes derogatory remarks and behavior directed towards others based on their sexual orientation. (Richter, 2007)

This example highlights the inclusion of sexual orientation, which assists school administrators and teachers to create a foundation for addressing student behaviors grounded in harassment based on sexual orientation.

Advocate for Statewide Adoption of LGBTQQ Inclusive Curricula

The students in this study noted the absence of LGBTQQ and gender related texts and topics in classes, as well as the silence of teachers regarding those topics. In addition, they had much misinformation regarding LGBTQQ issues. After engaging in the social justice curriculum in this study, many students experienced some transformation, which in certain cases diminished negative views and increased knowledge about LGBTQQ topics. The findings also illustrate that students were limited in their understanding of the oppression cycle, and needed multiple and more extensive experiences with the concepts of power, privilege, and oppression. This suggests that the disintegrated use of an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula in one public speaking class is not enough to combat school wide homophobia and heteronormativity. It must integrate throughout the curricula, streamed throughout a child’s education. These findings implicate the necessity of addressing the invisibility and silence about LGBTQQ topics in
school that the participants in this study noted, as well as the modification of some of their attitudes when they engaged in the LGBTQQ curricula. Another way that legislation can decrease homophobia and heteronormativity, simultaneously improving school climate for LGBTQQ students, is either through a statewide adoption of an LGBTQQ curricula or by providing resources for a school-created LGBTQQ curricula (see “Institutional Implications” for further details). Legislation supporting the adoption of an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula for every school has the potential to create caring environments for all students, provide motivation and encouragement for teachers to challenge homophobia and heteronormativity (Griffin and Ouelett, 2002; Lipkin, 2008), and support educational institutions and administrators in negotiating and addressing any parent or community discontent.

**Implications for Further Research**

Researchers interested in LGBTQQ issues in education can build on this study in several key areas by studying: the impact and process of expanding LGBTQQ inclusive curricula; approaches to homophobia and heteronormativity reduction; pedagogy and academic achievement; and conducting longitudinal studies about the long-term impact of LGBTQQ inclusive curricula on students’ beliefs and actions and teachers’ creation and implementation of the curricula.

**The Impact and Process of Incorporating LGBTQQ Inclusive Curricula**

Building on the literature regarding the importance of LGBTQQ inclusive curricula in schools, there are a number of research possibilities that I suggest to understand the impact of the curricula: studying the impact of LGBTQQ inclusive curricula on the school environment, studying family response to LGBTQQ inclusive and
exclusive curricula, studying teacher and administrator challenges and strategies to overcome challenges with regard to LGBTQQ inclusive curricula.

**Study the impact of LGBTQQ inclusive curricula on school environment.**

The findings from this study suggest the importance of an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula, which provides opportunities for students and teachers to challenge heteronormativity and homophobia. Unfortunately there is a dearth of literature that explores the impact of LGBTQQ curricula on the overall school climate. Studying the inclusion of such a curriculum and the impact that it has on the school environment would be a valuable contribution to the literature.

**Study family response to LGBTQQ inclusive and exclusive curricula.**

Considering that students identified church and home as two of the primary spaces where they received messages about LGBTQQ issues, further research is needed to understand parent responses to curricula regarding sexuality. With the goal of meeting the needs of students and their communities, additional research to describe the process of inviting parents into the creation of curricula would be indispensable. In addition to LGBTQQ students, there are also members of the student population who have same sex parents, and the homophobia that permeates the school not only disadvantages those children of same-sex parents but also makes the school unwelcoming to the parents. Examining how exclusive curricula condones and perpetuates institutional homophobia and heterosexism from same-sex parents and allies viewpoints would greatly expand the literature that exists.

**Study teacher-administrator challenges.** The literature and the findings from this study briefly present the challenges that administrators and teachers encounter when
implementing an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula. I identified several strategies from the literature and my own experience for overcoming challenges in implementing an LGBTQQ curricula, but more research is necessary that will concentrate on an in depth exploration of challenges to administrators and teachers, solutions for overcoming challenges, and the impact of those solutions on LGBTQQ students and the school environment.

**Approaches to Homophobia and Heteronormativity Reduction**

Building on the literature regarding LGBTQQ issues in education and in this study, a range of research possibilities come to mind. If we are to reduce homophobia, challenge heteronormativity, and bring more positive views of LGBTQQ people, research needs to focus on the discourse of students and teachers around LGBTQQ issues and the nature and impact of supportive relationships.

**Study discourse.** Discourse propagates homophobia and heterosexism in powerful ways; therefore, studying oppressive student and teacher discourse would inform the field. Studies exist that investigate the usage and impact of common words and phrases like, “fag, that’s so gay, lesbo, queer, dyke, fruit” revealing:

Whatever the surface meanings, however playful and benign some speakers might regard such language, the deeper truth reveals that regardless of context these words are invoked to signal difference. These words label, situate, categorize, define, delimit, and reinforce the positioning of sexual minorities as "other".

These words also insult, demean, and harm. (Schrader and Wells, 2004, p. 12) Teachers and students are entrenched in heterosexism, mostly unaware of how their discourse encourages homophobia, harms LGBTQQ students, and limits the potential of
all students. The students in this study discussed the impact of language during the sexuality unit and many struggled to understand how certain phrases could offend some people, validating the importance of these lessons. Little research has been conducted with high school students or with high school teachers investigating their oppressive discourse patterns and further research that interrupts heterosexist discourse and behaviors is necessary to improve the climate of schools.

**Study the nature and impact of supportive relationships.** An additional avenue of research that may lead to insights on reducing homophobia and heteronormativity is through research on supportive relationships between teachers and students. Research documents the positive results of supportive relationships between students and teachers, but it does not delve into why some teachers identify as allies who interrupt homophobia and heteronormativity and others do not. Ally behavior includes not tolerating name-calling, challenging homophobic remarks, using inclusive language, and decorating halls and classrooms in gay friendly materials (Daniel, 2007). This study highlights the importance of supportive relationships to ease students into vulnerable positions of inquiry, but it did not study the development of my ally stance. In schools where there are no openly LGBTQQ teachers, straight allies can benefit students. Students pay attention to teacher behaviors and mimic them; therefore, if teachers do not tolerate homophobic behavior, students begin to imitate that behavior (Horn, Szalacha, Drill, 2008). Further research is needed to understand (a) why teachers choose to act (or not act) as allies, (b) how they engage as allies effectively, (c) how teacher allies create supportive relationships with LGBTQQ and straight students in the context of LGBTQQ-
inclusive curricula, and (d) the impact of those relationships on student achievement and the school environment.

**Pedagogy and Academic Achievement.**

In the current age of Common Core Standards, rigorous standardized tests, and façades of “neutral” curriculum and because we know that students who do not feel validated in schools tend to achieve at lower rates (Kosciw, 2010; Ryan, 2003), increased research regarding the impact of social justice and LGBTQQ inclusive curricula on student achievement needs to occur. Although some research supports culturally responsive teaching and the positive effects on student achievement, teachers perceive limitations from the enforcement of standards that are sometimes in direct conflict with social justice aims and culturally responsive pedagogy (Dover, 2009). For example, participants in Dover’s (2009) study identified restrictive curriculum, pressure to “teach-to-the-test,” lack of administrative support, and student resistance to social justice curriculum as standard and curricular obstacles preventing teachers from using social justice and culturally relevant pedagogies. Investigating how social justice goals and culturally responsive principles can foster student achievement, expand beyond teachers’ perceptions of standards and further scholarship on reducing homophobia and heterosexism is essential. We know that exclusive curriculum, one that does not include LGBTQQ students, marginalizes an entire group of students and does not challenge the one-dimensional perspective that many heterosexual students have toward LGBTQQ people. We also know that when students are not validated, learning is more difficult which results in decreased school engagement and lower academic achievement.
(Blackburn, 2004; Kosciw, 2010). Studying LGBTQ inclusive curricula and it’s impact on academic achievement is a crucial way that researchers can expand on this study.

**Longitudinal Studies**

This study was of limited duration that only focused on students’ interactions with the curriculum across one semester and did not address the long-term impact on students’ beliefs. Longitudinal studies examining the impact of teacher preparation and educational interventions regarding homophobia are another gap in the scholarship. Szalacha (2004) recommends the following:

We must not fail to conduct ongoing formal and informal evaluations of these outreach efforts. Further, it is imperative that we conduct independent research on these efforts, including longitudinal studies that investigate the long-term effects of teacher preparation, in order to develop and refine educational interventions. Without such research, it will be impossible to justify public expenditure, improve practice or to adequately address the needs of our students.

(p. 76)

I suggest the following longitudinal studies to expand this study: a) impact of LGBTQ inclusive curricula on student’s beliefs at multiple intervals throughout participants lives, b) impact of LGBTQ inclusive curricula on student beliefs over an extended period of time, possible in two year follow up interviews for ten years, c) impact of professional development and teacher preparation on teachers ability to create and adapt LGBTQ inclusive curricula over an extended time period.
Conclusion

This study explored ways that negative portrayals of LGBTQQ youth might be altered through the incorporation of LGBTQQ texts and critical discussions surrounding the texts, media stereotypes, heteronormativity, heterosexual privilege, and gender in a high school Public Speaking class. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate ways that curricula in a high school Public Speaking class might utilize critical literacy practices within a social justice curriculum. The purpose of the curriculum was to place a focus on LGBTQQ and gender issues and to alter student attitudes, beliefs, and actions about LGBTQQ people and combat the victim stereotype. Many of the students experienced significant changes—from deepened awareness of LGBTQQ issues, advocacy for LGBTQQ rights and affirmation of their ally stance. As a teacher, I learned much about my students, my teaching, and my own strengths and biases throughout the study. I believe that other professionals interested in an LGBTQQ inclusive curricula can gain insights from the participants’ experiences and my own learning as presented in this dissertation.

The necessity that drove this study was the inequitable education received by many LGBTQQ and gender nonconforming students, which violates the federal promise of an equal education for all students and violates my beliefs about the equitable education of children. An inequitable education for LGBTQQ and gender nonconforming students results in school dropouts, lower academic performance, absenteeism and bullying—which is largely ignored by teachers and administrators (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Kosciw, 2010). In addition, the silence around LGBTQQ topics in school perpetuates homophobia, heteronormativity, and reinforces gender
stereotypes. Although I cannot determine if my study had an impact on the overall atmosphere of the school to decrease homophobia and heteronormativity, I know many of the LGBTQQ and heterosexual students in my classroom identify me as an ally. In the future, I hope to expand my influence to other teachers and students to create a safe and supportive environment for all students.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world” (Mahatma Gandhi Quotes, 2013). Unfortunately, my students consistently shared with me that they felt like society never changes; there would always be racism, hate, sexism, fear, classism, misunderstandings, heterosexism, and distrust of others, and they were helpless to stop it. I understood their frustration, but I did not know how to counter their attitudes. On a recent trip to Stanford University, I visited Rodin’s sculptures, The Burghers of Calais, depicting six citizens who offered their own lives to deliver the keys of Calais to King Edward III of England to end the Hundred Years War. The plaque adjoined to the statues reads: “For Rodin this episode was an opportunity to celebrate the idea that heroic deeds may be performed by ordinary people.” This quote provides me with an answer to my students’ dilemma. Ordinary people - me and my students and the people reading this dissertation-are the key to change. We are responsible for creating the society we want. Every action has an impact: some of us may be in a position like the Burghers of Calais to do something recognized in the history books, but the rest of us can make history by changing it. Standing by silently condones advocacy for hate, dominance, and oppression. In the words of Noah: “Stand up for what you believe in!” I believe that we have no other choice if we are to engage, as Freire (1970) urged, in courageous acts of love.
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YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE REFERENCE LIST


# APPENDIX A: SOCIAL JUSTICE TEXTS

Table A.1

**Social Justice Texts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td><em>Revisiting the Clark and Doll Study</em>&lt;br&gt; <em>Exploring Implicit Racial Bias</em>&lt;br&gt; <em>What Would You do If-Racial Profiling</em>&lt;br&gt; “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”-McIntosh&lt;br&gt; “Not Legal, Not Leaving”-Vargas</td>
<td>Video&lt;br&gt; Video&lt;br&gt; TV Episode Article Article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>“Myth of the Culture of Poverty”-Gorski&lt;br&gt; <em>People Like Us</em>&lt;br&gt; “Giving the Poor Their Rights”-Albright and DeSoto</td>
<td>Article Documentary Article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>“Sexuality History Timeline”-Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice&lt;br&gt; <em>Think B4 You Speak Commericals</em> - GLSEN&lt;br&gt; “10 Ways to Be an Ally”-GLAAD&lt;br&gt; <em>50 Shades of Gay</em> - iO Tillet Wright</td>
<td>Article Video Article Video</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

Date March 4, 2013,

Dear Parents/Guardians:

According to Bomer and Bomer (1998), “Learning to think in terms of making a better world, to reflect habitually about social and political problems and possibilities—these goals should surely be among those we have for our teaching and learning.” I completely agree with the authors of *Reading and Writing for Social Action*; and what better place to begin speaking out to make the world better than a Public Speaking class. This semester I am working on my dissertation at the University of South Carolina. I am inviting all of my students in Public Speaking 1 to take part in the study. Please read this form, and ask questions before you decide whether to have your students participate in the study. If you decide that you would like your student participate in this study, and he/she is under 18, please sign the permission slip below.

As a teacher I am interested in research that will improve my teaching practices and my students’ learning. This type of research is called “action research.” My study will focus on social justice issues and critical literacy. If you would like to review the materials related to the study at any time, you are always welcome to do so. Although I am conducting my research in my classroom and with my students, this project will not interfere in any way with my day-to-day lesson planning and teaching, nor will it single out any students. The research study takes place within an existing curriculum that is consistent with South Carolina English State Standards; it is the same curriculum that would be taught regardless of the study.

I will collect information by audio-recording conversations, collecting written responses, and keeping a teacher’s journal. I will record small and large group discussions and conduct small group interviews. Any information that could identify individual students in this study, like all other student-specific information in my classroom, will remain confidential. I will collect information throughout the semester, from February to June.

There are no risks involved in the participation of this study. The results of this study may be reported in professional settings or educational literature, but I will use pseudonyms for all names and places.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to refuse your student’s participation in the study and/or withdraw him/her at any time without penalty. By refusing your student’s participation in the study no data will be collected from your
child, but he/she will be required to complete all classwork as part of the unit. Your refusal to allow your child to participate will in no way hinder your child’s educational progress.

If you have any questions or would like to review the materials to be used during this study, please feel free to contact me:
Candace Lett  821-5362 or clett@lexington1.net
At the bottom of this letter, you will find a parent permission form. Please sign and date this form and return it to me by March 5, 2013.

Sincerely,

Candace Lett

Please check as appropriate, sign, and date:

_____ I have read this explanation and agree that my child may take part in this study.

_____ I do not wish for my child to take part in this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent/Guardian name (please print)</th>
<th>Parent/Guardian signature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Date ____________________

I agree to participate in the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant name (print) signature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Date ____________________
APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT SURVEY

Please circle the number that is closest to your belief. 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree.

In the United States, men and women are equal.
1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

Outside of the United States, men and women are equal.
1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

In the United States, it is acceptable to express your gender in different ways.
1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

Gender is biological.
1 2 3 4 5
Comments:

Gender is social.
1 2 3 4 5
Comments:
Age determines how you display your gender.

Comments:

Gay marriage should be legal.

Comments:

Words like “that’s gay” and “fag” are acceptable when you use them to joke around.

Comments:
APPENDIX D: DISTRICT PROPOSAL

Introduction:
Students are invited to participate in a research study investigating identity development and agency using critical literacy and studying social justice topics in the English Language Arts Curriculum, specifically a Public Speaking 1 class. This study is being conducted by Candace Lett in conjunction with the University of South Carolina. This project will serve as a pilot study for my dissertation as well as an assignment for EDRM 840 taught by Dr. Bryan and supported by my advisor Dr. Long.

Background Information:
Students are selected as possible participants in this research because they are students in Mrs. Lett’s Public Speaking 1 class, which is pertinent because this is an action research project. Using a workshop model as a primary instructional tool to investigate the English Language Arts standards, we will examine the promise of grounding projects in social justice texts. Using a critical literacy lens students will investigate these topics by responding to the texts, discussing them with people outside of class, collecting artifacts that support the investigation on that topic, and contributing to in class discussions. My research questions include:

- How do student’s responses about a social justice topic change after engaging in an inquiry of the topic?
- How do student’s agency and identity change as a result of investigating social justice topics?

After the data is gathered a more refined research question will be formed. The number of students depends on the number of students enrolled in Public Speaking 1 in the 2012-2013 school year.

Procedures:
This study will take place during the first 9 weeks of school in August of 2012. Every Monday students will watch or read a text of the week, they will write an initial response, have small group discussions, have a discussion with someone outside of class over the course of the week, gather artifacts that connect to the topic discussed in the article over the course of the week, and the following Monday engage in a discussion about what they learned on the topic. I will collect evidence by recording conversations, collecting written responses, and keeping a teachers journal. I will conduct student surveys reflecting on their learning throughout this process with open ended questions and conduct several audio recorded interviews. The research study takes place during a unit that is consistent with South Carolina English State Standards and curriculum; it is the same unit that would be taught regardless of the study. The only exception is that I will be collecting several additional pieces of data (surveys, interviews, and audio recordings). Consent forms will be obtained before any data is collected.
**Risks and Benefits:**
The study has several minimal risks. Students may feel uncomfortable answering questions because they may feel as if their grade will be impacted. However, a participants choice to not participate in the study will not impact graded assignments. This study is intended for informational purposes in order to improve instruction and not to penalize any student that has an opinion that may contradict my own. Students and parents may also feel that they may be misrepresented in the research. If parents and students wish to have a copy of the final research paper, I will send it to them upon request at the end of the investigation. Furthermore, if anyone is uncomfortable being audio recorded, they may exempt from the recorded discussions and still participate in the study.

The benefit to student participation in this project is that the feedback that I receive may improve my own instruction, as well as the instruction of other teachers conducting a similar inquiry project.

**Confidentiality:**
Any information obtained in connection with this research study that could identify the district, school, or individual students will be kept confidential. In any written reports, publications, or conference presentations, no one will be identified or identifiable; students will be allowed to choose pseudonyms and one will additionally be provided for the school. If I use a student writing sample, the work will be identified by the student’s pseudonym. Students will also be referred to by said pseudonyms in reports of interview data. The name of the school and district will not be revealed at any sharing of the results. I will keep the research results in a password protected computer and/or a locked file cabinet and only I and my advisor will have access to the records while I work on this project. Transcripts of the audio recorded interviews may be used in the final publication, but no one else will hear the recordings except myself and my advisor.

**Voluntary nature of the study:**
Participation in this research study is voluntary. Parents’ and students’ decision whether or not to participate will not affect their future relations with Mrs. Lett or the University of South Carolina in any way. Participants can refuse to answer any questions if they choose in the interview or survey. Students may also withdraw from the study at any time. If a student withdraws, students will not be required to answer surveys or interview questions and their work will not be entered into the data, but all work in the research unit must still be completed as part of the regular Public Speaking 1 curriculum.

I intend to share the results of this study with Lexington School District 1.

**Contacts and questions:**
If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me:

Candace Lett  821-5362 or clett@lexington1.net
APPENDIX E: UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL

February 20, 2013

Mrs. Candace Lett
College of Education
Instruction & Teacher Education, Languages and Literacy Program

Re: Pro00022855
Study Title: Risky Business: Using Critical Literacy and Social Justice Curricula to Transform a Public Speaking Class

Dear Mrs. Lett:

In accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(1), the referenced study received an exemption from Human Research Subject Regulations on 2/20/2013. No further action or Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is required, as long as the project remains the same. However, you must inform this office of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research protocol could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

Because this project was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, consent document(s), if applicable, are not stamped with an expiration date.

Research related records should be retained for a minimum of three years after termination of the study.

The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the Research Review Board. If you have questions, please contact...

Sincerely,
March 1, 2013

Dear Ms. Leit,

Members of the Research Committee have considered your proposal titled Risky Business: Using Critical Literacy and Social Justice Curricula to Transform a Public Speaking Class. The committee has conditionally recommended your project for approval by the Senior Leadership Team. That recommendation has been supported at the Senior Leadership level.

We receive many requests from researchers who want to collect data here. Each proposal is considered carefully. The district approves only those requests that are determined to be of value to the district, that do not interfere with the educational programs of the district, and that respect the privacy and due process rights of students and employees.

I have been notified that your request has been approved on the condition that you address the requirements listed below:

- You must reconcile the information with regard to risks in the consent form for parents with the information in your research proposal.

We wish you success with your project and look forward to reading your final report.

Best regards,

Chair, Research Committee

Enclosure
APPENDIX G: CLASS DISCOURSE RULES

Rate Your Group!

Group Members Names:

Instructions: Below are the rules and goals we set for our discussion groups. After your group’s discussion, rate your group on their progress using a 1-5 scale-1=poor and 5=excellent. Track your group’s progress on the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rule/Goal</th>
<th>3/25</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don’t get off topic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t interrupt.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give everyone a chance to speak before changing topic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t put someone down for their opinion.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk, Talk, Talk-Everyone!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage other people to talk.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make Connections to each other.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look more closely at the text-analyze it critically.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX H: WEEK TO WEEK ENGAGEMENTS

Table H. 1

**Week to Week Engagements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Drama Activity</th>
<th>Speaking Models</th>
<th>Impromptu Speech Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Storytelling</strong></td>
<td>Killer Activity (eye contact)</td>
<td>Ed Gavigan-Drowning on Sullivan Street</td>
<td>Something Important (to get to know students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alphabet Game (storytelling skills)</td>
<td>9/11 Tribute</td>
<td>Pick a Proverb (creativity and storytelling)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sound Ball (creativity and nonverbal communication)</td>
<td>Matt McGough-My first Day with the Yankees</td>
<td>This I Believe (storytelling)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Story, Story Die (storytelling and creativity)</td>
<td>Anthony Griffith-The Best of Times, the Worst of Times</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Persuasive</strong></td>
<td>PLEASE (persuasive skills)</td>
<td>Martin Luther King Jr.: “I Have a Dream”</td>
<td>Random Object (persuasive/propaganda techniques)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes/No (creativity and voice)</td>
<td>Hilary Clinton-Women’s Rights are Human Rights</td>
<td>Date Me (persuasive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’ve Got It, You Want It (persuasive skills)</td>
<td>Chimamanda Adichie-The Danger of a Single Story</td>
<td>Speech Reversal (persuasive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Happy Hands (creativity and body language)</td>
<td>Ghandi-Advocates Policy of Nonviolence (movie version)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informative</strong></td>
<td>Gibberish (body language and voice)</td>
<td>How Stuff Works Videos</td>
<td>Fairy Tale Reversal (gender)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What Comes Next (creativity)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Demonstration (information)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Distractions (avoid distractions while speaking)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Audience Choice (creativity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Special Occasion</strong></td>
<td>Charades (body language)</td>
<td>Movie Speeches: A Beautiful Mind (acceptance)</td>
<td>Mrs. Lett’s favorite student award (acceptance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotion Charades (voice)</td>
<td>Nixon (acceptance)</td>
<td>Farewell to the class (farewell)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Maid of Honor (toasts)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Legally Blonde (graduation)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jack (graduation)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ladder 49 (eulogy)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gladiator (motivational)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX I: MEETING LOG

Group Members Names:

Discussion Topic: ____________________________ Date: _____________

1. What were some of the topics you discussed?

2. Looking at your group rating of rules and goals, what do you want to focus on in your next discussion?

3. How will you make changes?

4. Who will be in charge of those changes?

___________________________________________________________________________________________________

What progress did you see on those goals/changes?
APPENDIX J: TEXT RESPONSES

Text of the Week Challenge-Dialogue

Name______________________________
Title _____________________________
Author ____________________________

Your Reflection: You can address your thoughts on the content, respond to the style of writing, or respond to the argument that the author makes. DO NOT SUMMARIZE.

Homework Challenge: Choose someone to have a conversation with about the topic of the week and the text.

Name of Dialogue Partner _______________________________
Signature of Dialogue Partner ____________________________

Main Points of Discussion: You can do a bullet list or write a paragraph reflecting on the experience of your discussion.
Text of the Week Challenge-Article

Name____________________________________
Title _________________________________
Author _______________________________

Your Reflection: You can address your thoughts on the content, respond to the style of writing, or respond to the argument that the author makes. DO NOT SUMMARIZE.

Homework Challenge: The topic of this week is _______________. Find a RECENT article that addressed the topic of the week in some way.

Title of the Article________________________________________
Author _________________________________________________
Publisher ________________________________________________

Summary:

Connection to text/discussions in class:

Questions:
Text of the Week Challenge—Words Around Us

Name __________________________________________________

Title ___________________________________________________

Author_________________________________________________

Your Reflection: You can address your thoughts on the content, respond to the style of writing, or respond to the argument that the author makes. DO NOT SUMMARIZE.

Words Around Us

Language plays a central role—both positive and negative—in shaping how we think about ourselves, others, and the world in general. Your class is going to begin an examination of the language used in school connected to ______________. During the next week, record every example of such language you hear. In some cases, language may be used to describe a particular person, while in other cases, it may be used to describe either a real or abstract group of people. In still other cases, the language may be used to describe something that has no connection to people.

It may not be practical (or safe) for you to record information in the presence of the people using it. In such instances, record the information later. At the minimum, you should record information on a daily basis. Waiting until the end of the week will probably lead to forgetting many particular incidents.

Record the exact words you see, hear, or use. You may be offended or have very strong feelings about the words you see or hear. You should make note of your personal response in the last column labeled “Reaction”. Under the heading “Who used,” do NOT write anyone’s name. Instead record whether the language was used by a student, teacher, staff person, or administrator. Under the heading “Where” you should record in what part of the school the language was used (e.g., hallway, playground, locker room, classroom, cafeteria).

In addition to describing your personal reaction in a phrase or two under the heading “Reaction,” you should also record the intention of the speaker using the language under the heading “Intention.” Was the language used to describe without placing value the person(s)? Was it used to hurt, demonize, or portray people in a negative light? Was it used to praise, celebrate, or portray people in a positive light? Was the language used seriously, mockingly, or comically? If you are uncertain or have contradictory ideas about how the language was used, note that here. Use additional sheets to record your data if necessary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>WORD/PHRASE</th>
<th>WHO USED</th>
<th>WHERE</th>
<th>INTENTION</th>
<th>REACTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX K: FINAL PROJECT INSTRUCTIONS

This research project is unlike many research projects you have done in the past because you are doing real world research, called social science research. Consider yourselves student researchers. You are researching your world, your lives, your interests embedded in social justice topics in YOUR WORLD!

Step One: Choose your topic.

Step Two: Research and Investigate your topic.

Research-All good researchers begin their study by reading the literature about their topic that already exists. You will do the same. You must collect information from at least four sources. You can read articles, sections of books, entire books, and view documentaries or informational videos. You will turn in your research notes with citations for a separate grade. After completing your research choose an appropriate format to present the findings from your literature. Put the information in categories and share ONLY the most important information. Make it a user friendly format. You can use, but are not limited to, keynote, venn diagram, charts, bullet lists, etc. You will present these findings to the class on for a quiz grade.

Investigation-Because your topics originate in the real world you are going to take what you’ve learned in the reading back to the real world and conduct an investigation. Think about the best way to investigate your topic.

Step Six: Presentation

The topic of your project is social justice oriented, and in this class we moved from discussing the problem to discussing how to solve the problem. You will do both in your final presentations. In the introduction to your presentation briefly discuss your research and the problem as it exists and then use the presentation to show the audience how to make and impact to fight, act, solve the problem. Think about how will you report your findings to a broader audience? Using a combination of speech techniques: persuasive, informative, storytelling, poetry, and performance, create a well-crafted and engaging presentation of your findings. TRANSFORM your information into an educational, but something that will engage a big audience-NOT A POWERPOINT! You will present this piece in the little theater.
APPENDIX L: GENDER TERMS ACTIVITY

Chart Paper Terms:

Male
Female
Masculine
Feminine
Gender
Biological Sex

Step One: Take post it notes and write words, phrases, examples that explain or describe those terms and put on the appropriate chart.

Step Two: Walk around and see what other people put on the charts/notes.

Step Three: Discuss in small groups.

Step Four: In small groups, create a graphic that illustrates the connection between the all of the terms.

Step Five: Share with whole class.
APPENDIX M: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR “LUCKY BOY”

Small Group Discussion Questions for “Lucky Boy”

- Share one quote that challenges your thinking and explain why
- Share one quote that you agree with and explain why
- Share one question you have about the article and discuss

Whole Group Discussion Questions for “Lucky Boy”

- Can there be a gender-neutral environment?
- What are the benefits of a gender-neutral environment?
- What are the consequences of a gender-neutral environment?
APPENDIX N: LEARNING GENDER ACTIVITY

What is gender? How do we learn about ourselves as gendered people? How do we learn about what it means to be a man or a woman?

Task: Show the process of learning gender. Use pictures, charts, words, numbers etc. There are no wrong answers! Think about how gender gets learned and absorbed in our lives. Use your collective experiences in a way that describes how gender is learned. Use the following questions to guide your discussion/product creation.

- What were the gendered messages in your home? For example, girls could…, boys could…, girls couldn’t…, boys couldn’t…
- What roles and behaviors were expected of you in your home because of your gender?
- Were there consequences for not following gendered expectations?
- What did you see as models of women’s roles/work/place? What did you see as models of men’s roles/work/place?
- What were the lessons of your early years in school? What models of maleness and femaleness did you see?
- What were the lessons of your teenage years? How did you see yourself in relation to maleness and femaleness? What did you notice around you?

Reflection Questions (Social Justice Notebook)

- What new ideas do you have from discussing “learning gender” in your small groups?
- What new ideas do you have from seeing other groups “learning gender” pictures?
- Does anybody else’s ideas challenge your ideas or your experiences with gender? Explain.
- How is sexism connected to how people are socialized into gender expectations?
- How is power and control related to how people are socialized into gender expectations?
APPENDIX O: PRIVILEGES OF BEING GENDER CONFORMING

In your social justice notebook, write down at least two ways in which you experience privilege because of gender identity and expression. For example, my job is not in jeopardy because I look/act/dress like a female instead of a male. Share your examples in your small groups. Make group list.

Other examples:

- I can use the restroom in public spaces without fear that I will be asked if I am in the right location or responses of violence.
- I can apply for jobs without having to worry about my gender identity.
- I can adopt a child without worry that my gender identity will make me ineligible.
- I can use my driver’s license or other forms of identification because the gender listed on my license matches my current gender.
- I can feel confident that I will be addressed by my preferred pronoun by sales clerks or strangers.
- I can refer to my past without changing my pronouns.

Reflection Questions:

- Was it difficult to come up with privileges? Why or why not?
- What were some privileges that you had not considered as such prior to this activity?
- What were some privileges that you had realized and may have worked toward challenging?
- What feelings came up for you during this activity?
- What is one idea that is sticking with you or one question you still have from this activity?
- What is one idea, thought, or hope that you want to carry with you into the next unit?
APPENDIX P: GENDER SOCRATIC CIRCLE PREWRITING

Jot down answers to the following:

- Should equality for women mean making things the same as men?

- In what ways do institutions oppress women and men?

- In what ways can EVERYONE stand up against gender oppression?

Think about these questions:

- In what ways are men and women equal in the US? In what ways are they unequal?
- In what ways do people express their gender?
- In what ways is people’s expression of gender acceptable and unacceptable in society?

Probes:

- What makes you feel that way?
- What beliefs do you hold that impact the way you feel?
- In what ways is gender biological? In what ways is it social?
- In what ways is it helpful to rely on gender roles?
- In which ways is not beneficial to rely on gender roles?
- In what ways is age a factor in understanding or expressing gender?
- What are the benefits of conforming to gender roles? The drawbacks to conforming to gender roles?
- How does weather or not you conform to a gender role affect your identity?
- How does weather or not your conform to a gender role affect how other people treat you?
- If society breaks down stereotypes, will it destroy our society? Someone said children will be messed up later in life.
APPENDIX Q: INSTITUTIONAL HETEROSEXISM POWERPOINT

INSTITUTIONAL HETEROSEXISM AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SEXUALITY

Gender/Sexuality Vocab Quiz

- Just so everyone is on the same page, let's take the gender/sexuality vocab quiz to make sure we all have the correct terminology for our discussions. Most of these terms should be familiar because we have discussed them in class.

Institutional Heterosexism

- Remember, I said this 9 weeks we would be focusing on bigger structures that encourage and enforce “isms”.
- Look around the room, you will see six charts (Family, Education, Health care, Workplace, Legal systems, Media).
- This activity will focus on institutional heterosexism—how institutional policies, practices, and norms reinforce heterosexism. Remember this can be conscious or unconscious.

Heterosexual Privilege

- Think about the past units in which we talked about the ways in which we are privileged. In your social justice notebooks list two ways that heterosexuals are privileged in our society. For example, I am not identified or labeled—politically, socially, economically, or otherwise—by my sexual orientation.
- Share these as a class.
- Go over additional examples.

Group Activity

- Each group will start at one chart and write as many examples as they can think of institutional heterosexism for the institution labeled on the chart.
- You will have two minutes and will rotate to the next chart.
- When all groups have added their examples, we will read them all aloud.

Reflection

- In your Social Justice Notebook, answer the following questions:
  - For which institution was it easy or difficult to identify examples of institutional heterosexism? Why?
  - What was new or surprising to you?
  - How do these institutional factors advantage heterosexual people?
  - How do these institutional factors disadvantage lesbian, gay and bisexual people?

Reflection Continued

- How do the institutional manifestations we have listed reflect and reinforce prejudices about gay, lesbian, and bisexual people?
- What connections can you make to what we have discussed earlier in this course?

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APPENDIX R: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE POWERPOINT

FREEWRITING
○ In your Social Justice Notebook, describe a time when you were insulted or hurt by another person and they brushed it off by saying something like, “I didn’t mean it like that.”

SCENARIO
○ Students are at their lockers just before the start of first period. One student takes off his jacket and is wearing a very bright t-shirt with an unusual design. Another student remarks, “Oh, my god, that shirt is so gay!” Several students laugh. A teacher, who is passing by and overhears the comment, tells the student who made the remark to cut it out. The student replies, “I just meaning that it’s a weird shirt.” The teacher tells everyone to get to class.

GROUP WORK
○ Each group will be assigned a role of a bystander, someone standing by the lockers in the scenario. Create a role play that describes the student’s reaction.

POINT
○ Language evolves and sometimes comes into common use in ways that we take for granted, but that is hurtful nonetheless. Consider the actual meaning of the words you use and the possible impact—not just your intention—before speaking.

REFLECTION
○ What are your feelings and reactions to these activities?
○ Which part had the most impact on you? (positive/negative)
○ What surprised you about the activities?
○ What lasting lessons will you take away from these activities?
○ What phrases and minuses do you have for these activities?
APPENDIX S: FROM BYSTANDER TO ALLY POWERPOINT

* From Bystander to Ally
Adapted from GLSEN Educator’s Guide

*Scenario
One of the students at your lunch table accidentally knocks over a bowl of food. The student next to her snaps, “You’re such a retard.” You shrink at the sound of this affront, especially since you are aware that another student at the table has a brother with a mental disability, but you avert your eyes and say nothing.

*Can you Relate?
Think of a time when you have heard language used in a way that made you feel uncomfortable, yet no one put a stop to it. In your social justice notebook, write an instance, making sure to include details about how others responded to the incident. Share (my story—my brother) Volunteers

*What do you think would have been the right thing to do in this situation?
*Why do you think no one put a stop to the negative behavior in each situation?
*Why is there a discrepancy between what people know is the right thing to do and how they actually respond?

*Solutions

*Actions
What are some ways that we can shift from being bystanders to allies?
*Make a list on the board.
*Read 10 Ways to be an Ally

*Being an ally is a process, one day and one situation you may take action and in another you don’t. People constantly struggle with the complex social processes of our world, don’t get frustrated, give yourself a hand for acting when you do, and always remember to keep working on the process of becoming an ally to make our world a better place for EVERYBODY!

*Always Becoming an Ally
APPENDIX T: SEXUALITY SOCRATIC CIRCLE PREWRITING

- Should equality for homosexuals mean making things the same as heterosexuals?

- In what ways do institutions oppress homosexuals?

- In what ways can EVERYONE stand up against heterosexual oppression?

Other Questions To Think About:

- In what ways are LGBTQ people equal to heterosexuals in the US? In what ways are they unequal?
- Can you think of times when you or someone you know felt pressure to conform to gender and sexuality norms out of fear of being called a lesbian or gay?
- How does this information (from the unit) confirm or contradict what you have learned about the relationship among biological/birth sex, gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation?
- How does confusion among biological/birth sex, gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation support stereotypes of lesbians, gay men, or bisexual people?
- How do the historical foundations help to explain contemporary institutional mechanisms of heterosexism in law, medicine, religion, and education?
- What do you notice about the intersections of multiple identities that might affect people’s experience?
APPENDIX U: MIDTERM REFLECTION

Assignment One

One: Create a graphic representation showing how your identity, power, privilege, oppression, and action works in your life and community. Write a paragraph explaining the graphic. You can use any medium you like, digital or paper. Turn in with your Portfolio.

Assignment Two

1. Thinking about the race and social class unit that we have just completed, are there any areas in which your attitudes or beliefs have changed? Describe in detail these changes. What do you think assisted in these changes?

2. Are there any areas in which your attitudes or beliefs about race and social class stayed the same? Describe in detail the beliefs/attitudes you continue to hold and why these attitudes have stayed the same.

3. What impact did the texts studied have on your concept of race and social class? and how did they impact you?

4. What impact did your small group discussions have on your concept of race and social class? and how did they impact you?

5. What impact did whole class discussions have on your concept of race and social class? and how did they impact you?

6. Please write any additional information you think is important for me to know.
APPENDIX V: FINAL REFLECTION

Part I: School

Directions: Read the quote and answer the questions in complete sentences.

“Conversations about how youth think about difference need to move beyond questions addressing individual attitudes and behaviors and toward how schools privilege some groups and marginalize others. Young people’s attitudes about difference are partially formed in a school based social scene that rewards conformity, and school is a primary cultural site where youth learn rules about who men and women are supposed to be” (Payne & Smith, 2012, p. 188).

1. How do schools enforce dominant (norms) ways of being?

2. How can schools be part of the solution instead of part of the problem in regards to all the isms we studied this year?

3. What does the quote mean in your own words?

4. What is the biggest social problem facing our school (WKHS)? How can we solve it?

Part II: Gender and Sexuality

Directions: Thinking about the gender and sexuality unit that we have just completed, answer the following questions. Please think carefully and respond thoughtfully and completely.

1. Are there any areas in which your attitudes or beliefs have changed? Describe in detail these changes. What do you think assisted in these changes?

2. Are there any areas in which your attitudes or beliefs about gender and sexuality stayed the same? Describe in detail the beliefs/attitudes you continue to hold and why these attitudes have stayed the same.

3. What impact did the texts studied have on your concept of gender and sexuality? and how did they impact you?

4. What impact did your small group discussions have on your concept of gender and sexuality? and how did they impact you?
5. What impact did whole class discussions have on your concept of gender and sexuality? and how did they impact you?

6. Please write any additional information you think is important for me to know.

Part III: Social Justice Curriculum

Directions: Think about the entire social justice curriculum: discussions, activities, and texts about power, privilege, oppression, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Answer the following questions, again please think carefully and respond thoughtfully.

1. What new understandings have you gained from some/any part of the social justice curriculum?

2. What “Yes, but” reactions are you experiencing?

3. What aspects of the material was confusing? Write some questions that you have now?

4. Are there any new connections or insights you have made? Explain/describe.

5. What did you learn about your experience of power, privilege, and oppression?

6. What information, activities, discussions seemed useful to you?

7. What aspects of being an ally will work for you? Which ones won’t work? Explain/Describe.
APPENDIX W: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Small group interviews Questions

Protocol: All students will be asked to participate in a small group interviews at the completion of the gender unit, the completion of the sexuality unit, and at the end of the semester. I will group students randomly to answer the following questions.

Questions:
- What prior experiences have you had reading, writing, and talking about (gender, sexuality, social justice issues)?
- Have you seen any changes in yourself through inquiry into these topics? What led to those changes?
- Outside of class, have these discussions and texts, influenced you in any way?
- What were some likes and dislikes of the unit?