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## Supporting LGBTQ+ ELA Students Through Action Research

Nicole Mustaccio

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# SUPPORTING LGBTQ+ ELA STUDENTS THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my children, Austin, Dante, and Kathryn, who have taught me to not take myself so seriously all the time, to live in the moment, to enjoy the simple things in life, and to be true to myself. A special dedication also goes out to my Class of 2022 and 2023 seniors and Class of 2026 Grade 9 students, who not only challenged me, but also made each day in class fun, meaningful, and impactful. Thank you for challenging gender norms inside and outside the classroom. To all the LGBTQ+ students, you are seen, and you are important.

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## ABSTRACT

English Language Arts curriculums traditionally include canonical authors such as Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, and William Shakespeare. However, educators may not discuss the writers' nonnormative sexuality. Moreover, educators may avoid teaching literature from a queer perspective, whether due to discomfort with LGBTQ+ terminology or because of a lack of professional development opportunities related to queer authors and queer theory.

In response to this problem of practice, I conducted this action research study to change the heteronormative culture at my high school. By providing professional development to fellow English Language Arts teachers, I sought to encourage the inclusion of LGBTQ+ authors and themes. Data sources included pre and post surveys with Likert-scale and open-ended questions, as well as a researcher journal. The professional development sessions focused on LGBTQ+ terminology, heteronormativity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and queer theory and offered sample lessons to help the teachers analyze literature through a queer perspective.

The study confirmed English Language Arts teachers lack comfort and knowledge to incorporate LGBTQ+ authors and queer theory into their classrooms and pedagogy. Therefore, I recommend targeted professional development focusing on LGBTQ+ terminology and history, heteronormativity, queer theory, and lessons on incorporating LGBTQ+ authors and texts to help challenge heteronormative culture and increase English Language Arts teachers' knowledge and comfort.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Abstract .....	v
List of Tables .....	vii
List of Figures .....	viii
List of Abbreviations .....	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	14
Chapter 3: Methodology .....	34
Chapter 4: Findings .....	44
Chapter 5: Implications .....	82
References .....	91
Appendix A: Research Study Invitation .....	98
Appendix B: Survey 1 .....	99
Appendix C: Survey 2 .....	100
Appendix D: Survey 3 .....	101
Appendix E: Survey 4 .....	102
Appendix F: Survey 5 .....	103
Appendix G: The Gender Unicorn .....	104

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1 Research Timeline .....	37
Table 4.1 Participants.....	45
Table 4.2 Pre-Session Frequency Table for Survey 1.....	47
Table 4.3 Pre-Session Frequency Table for Survey 2.....	53
Table 4.4 Pre-Session Frequency Table for Survey 3.....	60



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4.1 Comparison of Survey 1 Results for Question 1 .....	50
Figure 4.2 Comparison of Survey 1 Results for Question 2 .....	50
Figure 4.3 Comparison of Survey 1 Results for Question 3 .....	51
Figure 4.4 Comparison of Survey 1 Results for Question 4 .....	51
Figure 4.5 Comparison of Survey 1 Results for Question 5 .....	52
Figure 4.6 Comparison of Survey 2 Results for Question 1 .....	57
Figure 4.7 Comparison of Survey 2 Results for Question 2 .....	58
Figure 4.8 Comparison of Survey 2 Results for Question 3 .....	58
Figure 4.9 Comparison of Survey 2 Results for Question 4 .....	59
Figure 4.10 Comparison of Survey 3 Results of Question 1 .....	64
Figure 4.11 Comparison of Survey 3 Results for Question 2 .....	65
Figure 4.12 Comparison of Survey 3 Results for Question 3 .....	65

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ELA.....	English Language Arts
FLIC.....	Florida Legislative Investigation Committee
GLSEN.....	Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network
RSIS .....	The Reduction of Stigma in Schools

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Teaching literature through a queer lens was honestly not something I thought about until May 2011, when an incident in my Senior College Preparatory class changed my perspective. As I prepared to delve into one of my favorite works, Dante's *Inferno*, students filed into the classroom as usual and began to answer the "Do Now" questions on the board: "How would you describe Hell? Who are sinners that belong in Hell?" As the class discussion began, I introduced the text and mentioned that Dante put certain popes in Hell for their sins. One student, whom I will call Johnny, raised his hand and said, "Popes need to be in Hell because they are gay and hurt children." I immediately heard gasps throughout the class, and my heart began to race.

There I was, a queer educator who was not out at the time because, without tenure, I did not want to lose my job for being queer. I had a decision to make. Do I come out and risk my job to address this issue, or do I tell Johnny his comment is inappropriate and move on? I decided I needed to come out and educate Johnny and the rest of the class about this ignorant belief. As the class stared at me, I stepped away from the whiteboard and asked, "Are you insinuating that all gay people hurt children?" Johnny responded, "Yeah, that's what I was taught to believe." I responded, "I'm queer, and I certainly have not and will never hurt a child. You're arguing that gays should not be trusted around children, which is an invalid statement. You can't connect those who hurt children with the LGBTQ+ community." The class fell silent as students looked at each other, afraid to

say anything. Johnny slowly raised his hand and said, “Are you for real? You’re gay?” I confidently replied, and Johnny responded, “Well, damn! That changes everything! You’re a cool teacher, and you’re gay? Now I feel terrible for what I’ve said.”

A wave of relief rushed over me. I told Johnny I forgave him and encouraged him and his classmates to learn from his statement by changing their view of the LGBTQ+ community. The rest of the period, we did not focus on Dante’s *Inferno*. Instead, I allowed my students to ask me anything about my queer identity. The questions ranged from “how did you know you were queer?” to “were you bullied in school?” and even “do your parents accept you?” The entire class was engaged and respectful and I felt I was doing something important. For some students, especially students like Johnny, I was the first queer person they knew. After class, I felt accomplished; I felt proud; I felt like I genuinely changed some students’ perspectives. This one 57-minute experience made me realize the need for LGBTQ+ inclusion in my classroom—for LGBTQ+ students to see themselves represented in the works we study and for all students to be able to analyze literature through a queer lens to identify and understand the social injustices the LGBTQ+ community faces. As I learned that day, a more inclusive classroom approach can change a student like Johnny’s negative views of the LGBTQ+ community.

Another incident that challenged my heteronormative thinking and teaching was meeting a student named Ethan. In my sophomore homeroom, he presented outwardly as a girl named Kathryn, and we talked about literature, music, and television shows. Although I got to know Ethan more, I did not really think much of the interaction. At the beginning of Ethan’s junior year, he stopped by after school one day to chat, and we talked for almost 5 hours about life, our experiences of being bullied in high school, and

so much more. Before he left, Ethan handed me a note that read “Do not read until you get home.” Puzzled, but respecting his wishes, I waited until I got home, where I learned how he knew from the age of 3 that he was a boy but did not quite know how to tell anyone. When he was 14, he saw and identified with the term *transgender* and was using the note to come out to me as a transgender boy. Absorbing each word, I was nervous about what to say the next day. I admit I was ignorant about transgender identity. All I knew was that Ethan was a great kid and I needed to support him. When he came to me before homeroom, I pulled him aside and said, “I read the note. You’re my son, and I want you to know that I will always love and support you here at school and beyond.” As relief washed over Ethan’s face, he told me for the first time he felt seen and supported. From then on, Ethan would spend countless days after school with me, answering every question I had about being transgender and discussing dysphoria, surgery, gender roles, and anything else. As our relationship grew stronger, he began to call me mom, as his own parents were not supportive at the time.

These experiences with Johnny and Ethan caused me to reflect on my 13 years as a high school English teacher and acknowledge that I fell into the heteronormative culture of my high school. While obtaining my master’s degree, I studied the poetry of Walt Whitman, particularly from *Live Oak, with Moss*, which centered on the beautiful love two men shared. Despite writing many papers on Whitman’s bisexuality, when I began teaching, I avoided the topic because I was afraid of being reprimanded by my principal and students’ parents or guardians. During lessons on *Leaves of Grass*, I focused solely on Whitman’s love of nature and aspects of transcendentalism. In retrospect, I felt like a fraud: a queer educator, incredibly knowledgeable about Whitman,

yet defaulting to a heteronormative pedagogical lens amid the heteronormative culture of my high school. If I, a queer teacher, avoided discussing queer theory, I suspected my straight colleagues did not broach LGBTQ+ topics either. When I asked my fellow English teachers, two said they did not feel comfortable teaching through a queer perspective because of their religious beliefs, yet the other 13 expressed interest in teaching through a queer lens but did not feel educated enough on LGBTQ+ terminology or queer theory to do so.

Even I sometimes struggle to openly discuss my queer identity in the classroom for fear of backlash. In fact, when I began mentioning Whitman's bisexuality in class, inviting students to analyze a transcendental-era poem from the perspective of an LGBTQ+ individual who may be afraid to come out, I was summoned to my supervisor's office. A parent had accused me of "spreading my gay agenda" and "trying to make my students gay." My supervisor instructed me not to teach Whitman from a queer lens anymore as "it is not technically on the curriculum, and it can make students feel uncomfortable." This suggested solution harms LGBTQ+ students *and* straight and cisgender students who need to join forces against LGBTQ+ discrimination.

Learning only from a heteronormative perspective causes LGBTQ+ students to feel like they have no value or purpose and sends a message to all students that the LGBTQ+ community's contributions within society and culture are of little to no importance. Queer students recognize when their culture is missing from lessons or invisible in the school environment. They notice when schools neglect to celebrate LGBTQ+ History Month in October or Pride Month in June. As an out, queer, nonbinary English teacher, I understand and empathize with these students. I know their pain, their

anxiety, and their feelings of being worthless are real because the experiences they relay to me were my experiences in high school as well.

### **Problem of Practice**

The climate at my high school perpetuates heteronormative practices and beliefs, and I unknowingly contributed to this non-inclusive culture early in my teaching career, yet my school is not unique in its heteronormativity. As a recent nationwide survey from the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reported,

approximately 95.3% of LGBTQ+ students heard types of homophobic remarks (e.g., “dyke” or “faggot”); 60.3% heard this type of language frequently or often, and 56.6% of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff, and 71.0% of students reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or another school staff. (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. 21)

Given these statistics, queer-inclusive schools are not only necessary but critical.

Unfortunately, my school’s English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum tends to follow a straight, White, cisgender, heteronormative approach, disregarding many different races, cultures, ethnicities, and identities. I do not believe this omission to be malicious, both because of my own experiences and because I know many teachers are not educated on queer theory, have not been taught to analyze literature through a queer lens, nor have had much professional development on terminology and issues affecting LGBTQ+ students. I believe many teachers, my colleagues included, are willing to teach literature through a queer perspective but lack the proper professional development to succeed.

Mindful of my own challenges to implement LGBTQ+ inclusion, I, too, could benefit from additional professional learning opportunities.

Ostensibly, my state of New Jersey supports the idea of an inclusive curriculum. The governor recently signed a law that aligns with New Jersey's Core Curriculum Content Standards and seeks to "add LGBT people and individuals with disabilities to the existing list of underrepresented cultural and ethnic groups which are covered by current law related to inclusion in textbooks and other instructional materials" (Bill A1335, 2018). However, despite the law's potential to create a safer environment for LGBTQ+ students by promoting a climate of respect, sympathy, empathy, and acceptance, my colleagues and I have yet to receive any professional development that would support our ability to implement such curricular changes. Although I am eager to teach from a queer perspective, my colleagues are understandably afraid to do so because they are not educated enough on LGBTQ+ students or issues.

Incorporating LGBTQ+ texts school-wide creates a positive climate of safety and acceptance for the LGBTQ+ community (Dinkins & Englert, 2015). Conversely, the status quo school environment for LGBTQ+ youth can be filled with anxiety, fear, bullying, and self-doubt. By following a heteronormative approach, school districts minimize or ignore the contributions of cultural and historical figures like Harvey Milk, Alice Walker, or Bayard Rustin, which sends an especially harmful message to LGBTQ+ students. Alternatively, an inclusive curriculum "provide[s] a mirror when it reflects individuals and their experiences," so a queer-inclusive curriculum can "validate the existence of an often invisible population" while it "gives other students a window" by exposing them to diverse perspectives and experiences (McGarry, 2013, p. 28). LGBTQ+



students need to see themselves in the curriculum, and all students need to open their minds to identifying and addressing social problems. As Page (2017b) asserted,

when queer students are not visible in the curriculum [and] when the school is silent about their experience, this creates feelings of disenfranchisement and rejection. It creates ‘stigmatizing messages’ that these students are not valued. Students’ identities are erased and invalidated. (p. 678)

Schools with this type of environment are dangerous to LGBTQ+ students due to a lack of acceptance not only by their peers but often by administrators and faculty as well.

What can teachers like me do to change the school climate to make LGBTQ+ students feel safer and accepted? In my view, professional development centered on LGBTQ+ terminology and issues could be an important first step. For my ELA colleagues especially, learning how to apply and teach queer theory could foster safer and more welcoming classrooms for LGBTQ+ students and ensure straight and cisgender students learn about the social injustices oppressing the LGBTQ+ community. In fact, Page (2017b) cited “queer-inclusive curriculum” as “one key resource that increases visibility” and “provides a sense of belonging” (p. 678). Targeted professional development can support such classroom-level changes that challenge the overall school climate, showing LGBTQ+ students that they do belong and sending a message to all students that the LGBTQ+ community has made a tremendous cultural impact.

Without sufficient professional support, ELA teachers may continue to promote a cisgender and heteronormative curriculum, which can have detrimental effects on LGBTQ+ students. When such students “seldom see themselves or their struggles reflected within their high school curricula,” they often “learn it is best to stay silent, that

‘it gets better’ after they graduate” (Burke & Greenfield, 2016, p. 46). My students should not have to wait that long to feel seen and included. Framing my high school’s heteronormative climate as a problem of practice enabled me to turn to action research to transform it.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

To resolve my problem of practice (i.e., to promote a more inclusive school climate), I investigated my ELA colleagues’ difficulties and fears related to teaching literature through a queer lens and provided targeted professional development to help them overcome those challenges. Through action research (Herr & Anderson, 2015), I sought to answer the following questions:

1. How does targeted professional development impact ELA teachers’ knowledge of queer theory?
2. How does targeted professional development impact ELA teachers’ comfort with LGBTQ+ terminology and teaching from a queer perspective?

These research questions supported my aim of creating a more inclusive high school environment and curriculum by allowing me to gauge the comfort level and knowledge of each ELA participant through pre and post data to determine the effectiveness of the professional development sessions I facilitated.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This action research study drew on the concept of a null curriculum (Eisner, 1985), queer theory as a means of literary analysis (Foucault, 1978), and guidelines for professional development regarding LGBTQ+ issues. The null curriculum is a way to describe what students do not have the opportunity to learn, whether because of exclusion

or omission. When teachers and administrators gain awareness of the impact of the null curriculum, they may be more motivated to promote inclusion. Due to the specific manifestation of the null curriculum in my problem of practice, queer theory, which explores the oppressive power of dominant social norms like heteronormativity, illuminated more inclusive pedagogical approaches. Professional development (i.e., ongoing learning opportunities) could support this process by helping educators become more comfortable with queer theory and knowledgeable about LGBTQ+ issues facing their students. As a practitioner and a researcher, I played an active role by designing professional development for the ELA department, using queer theory in my own classroom, and using this complete framework to assess the outcome of my action research. I elaborate on each theoretical lens in Chapter 2.

### **Overview of Methodology**

A qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was an appropriate approach for exploring my problem of practice because I endeavored to “determine the facts and characteristics of the phenomenon” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 5) of ELA teachers’ hesitancy to discuss LGBTQ+ authors and literature. Collecting survey data enabled me to design and assess professional development to prepare them to discuss LGBTQ+ issues and terminology or introduce LGBTQ+ authors, literature, or lessons into their classrooms. I also collected data in the form of a researcher journal in which I recorded observation notes on my participants’ discussions during the sessions. As I explain in Chapter 3, I secured all surveys, journal entries, and professional development slides in a locked filing cabinet or password-protected cloud storage, and I use pseudonyms for any

references to participants or students. Conducting ethical research also required that I address my positionality.

### **Positionality**

As a queer educator, I felt a moral responsibility to help my colleagues understand the social injustices the LGBTQ+ community endures and teach literature through a queer lens. I understand LGBTQ+ students' painful struggles, as I was bullied and beaten up in high school for being queer. I felt like I was worthless and did not belong, and my teachers never incorporated LGBTQ+ authors into their curriculum or taught through a queer lens. As I shared in my introduction, I have also witnessed the pain transgender students experience when their biological parents disown them and when they, too, experience bullying, cultural invisibility, and a lack of curricular representation.

Because of these experiences, I am committed to ensuring all my students are accepted for who they are and feel safe, appreciated, and respected in my classroom. By changing my school's culture, I could give marginalized students the chance I never had in high school. This relationship to the topic of my study made me an insider, as did the fact that my action research occurred within my school.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "action research is about engaging in action [...] to change some aspect of [a] situation" (p. 51). Changing my school's heteronormative culture could begin with changing the curriculum and instruction in my ELA department, which required me to collaborate with other insiders: my colleagues. Although I anticipated some discomfort on their part, I had what I believed to be good intentions: to address their hesitation regarding LGBTQ+ issues and queer-inclusive curriculum through targeted professional development. I could cater to my participants'

needs by creating professional development sessions that built on our existing relationships, drawing on my familiarity with our school context, ELA curriculum, and student body. As an openly queer, nonbinary teacher, I could also share my experiences of being bullied and feeling like I did not belong in high school, underscoring the urgency of the problem.

### **Significance**

My action research study occurred in a place “that reflect[s] a society characterized by conflicting values and an unequal distribution of resources and power” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 4): a diverse public high school in New Jersey. About 10% of the approximately 2000 students identify as LGBTQ+, yet the school does little to promote or celebrate diversity, thereby perpetuating heteronormative practices and ideas. If successful, my study would not only make my fellow ELA teachers more knowledgeable about and comfortable with LGBTQ+ issues and queer theory but could also improve their ability to support LGBTQ+ students. In other words, I saw the potential to promote inclusivity throughout my high school. The professional development I designed could lead to a safer, more welcoming school community—where LGBTQ+ students feel represented, valued, and respected, and where students who are not members of the LGBTQ+ community are more aware of the social injustices their peers face.

Because a lack of professional development that addresses LGBTQ+ issues and queer theory is not unique to my school, my research, by promoting more inclusive pedagogical methods, may also be of interest to other audiences, especially in the field of ELA. Although action research does not aim for generalizability (Herr & Anderson,

2015), the findings I present in Chapter 4 might be transferable to other schools and communities that are striving to become more inclusive. In Chapter 5, I elaborate on the implications of my work.

### **Key Terms**

**Asexual:** the lack of sexual attraction to others, or low or absent interest in or desire for sexual activity. It may describe a sexual orientation or the lack thereof. It may also be categorized more widely to include a broad spectrum of asexual sub-identities.

**Bisexual:** a person whose primary sexual and affectional orientation is toward people of the same and other genders or people regardless of gender.

**Cisgender:** a gender identity or performance in a gender role that society deems to match the person's assigned sex at birth.

**Gay:** a sexual and affectional orientation toward people of the same gender.

**Heteronormative:** attitudes and behaviors that incorrectly assume gender is binary (i.e., women and men). A belief that people should align with society's conventional expectations for gender identity, gender expression, and sexual and romantic attraction.

**Lesbian:** usually, a woman whose primary sexual and affectional orientation is toward people of the same gender.

**LGBTQ+:** an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning. These terms describe a person's sexual orientation or gender identity; the umbrella term can refer to the whole community.

**Queer:** people, particularly younger people, whose sexual orientation is not exclusively heterosexual. Those who identify as queer may perceive the terms lesbian, gay, and bisexual as too limiting and fraught with inapplicable cultural connotations.

**Transgender (or trans):** when one's internal knowledge of gender differs from conventional or cultural expectations based on one's sex assigned at birth.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

My problem of practice, my high school's heteronormative culture, manifested in an ELA curriculum that prioritized the works of cisgender, straight men, and women. Lessons might cover authors like Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes without discussing their sexuality or analyzing their writing through a queer lens. Similarly, units on *The Crucible* might thoroughly address the play's allusions to the Red Scare and McCarthyism but stop short of discussing the Lavender Scare, which simultaneously targeted the LGBTQ+ community. Inclusive ELA curriculum can support LGBTQ+ students and "stem the tide of harassment, violence, depression, and other issues" they face (Page, 2017a, p. 2), whereas the omission of queer literature and perspectives teaches students to ignore LGBTQ+ individuals, perpetuating heteronormativity. According to Page (2017a), some teachers want to include LGBTQ+ texts but need "more guidance in selecting such texts" (p. 6). Likewise, my ELA colleagues seemed willing to make their classrooms more inclusive but lacked knowledge of LGBTQ+ terminology and history, current issues facing LGBTQ+ students, and queer theory.

To address my school's heteronormative climate, I investigated the impact of targeted professional development sessions, guided by the following questions:

1. How does targeted professional development impact ELA teachers' knowledge of queer theory?



2. How does targeted professional development impact ELA teachers' comfort with LGBTQ+ terminology and teaching from a queer perspective?

In preparation, I reviewed “the current state of knowledge” related to my topic (Machi & McEvoy, 2016, p. 4), specifically by examining literature that addresses the need for an inclusive ELA curriculum and how to support ELA educators' learning about LGBTQ+ history and terminology, issues facing LGBTQ+ students, and queer theory. I identified credible primary sources (i.e., peer-reviewed articles and book chapters) relating to the problem of practice through EBSCOhost, Educational Resources Information Center, ProQuest, and the University of South Carolina academic databases.

After elaborating on my framework, I discuss major events in LGBTQ+ history, including the history of LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools. I also address present-day policy changes. Lastly, I emphasize the need to include LGBTQ+ issues and texts in an ELA curriculum and identify voids that influenced the design of my action research study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As I explained in Chapter 1, three big ideas connected to my problem of practice and suggested how I might resolve it. This section expands on each lens: null curriculum, queer theory, and professional development. I also discuss how each lens connects to the need to challenge heteronormativity in a high school environment by incorporating LGBTQ+ authors and queer theory into ELA curriculum and pedagogy.

#### **Null Curriculum**

Eisner (1985) argued that all schools teach three curricula: explicit, implicit, and null. Explicit curriculum is the learning plan a district, school, or teacher has in place, including textbooks, lesson plans, and other resources teachers use. Implicit curriculum

focuses on lessons the students perceive from the teacher's attitude and the school climate and environment, which "socialize children to a set of expectations that some argue are profoundly longer lasting than what is intentionally taught or what the explicit curriculum of the school publicly provides" (Eisner, 1985, p. 88). My school's heteronormative culture sends implicit messages, which the null curriculum (i.e., non-taught subjects) reinforces. Whether topics are dismissed because of teacher bias or banned by school authorities, schools implicitly teach a null curriculum to students, conveying "the kinds of options one can consider [...] and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problem" (Eisner, 1985, p. 97).

For example, when educators teach literature from only a heterosexual or cisgender point of view, whether because of their own bias or districts' not allowing LGBTQ+ authors in an ELA curriculum, students interpret the "straight" lens as the only proper way to analyze literature, therefore dismissing societal issues and social injustices within the LGBTQ+ community. Constructing an ELA curriculum that centers the works of Mark Twain, Arthur Miller, and Robert Frost—all White, heterosexual, cisgender men—and excludes prominent LGBTQ+ authors like Lorraine Hansberry, Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, and Allen Ginsberg reinforces to students that only White, heterosexual, cisgender men offer anything of literary value. Eliminating marginalized groups, whether intentionally—to avoid backlash from parents, teachers, or students—or unintentionally, devalues the critical contributions of LGBTQ+ authors and communicates a harmful message to the school community.

Students, especially LGBTQ+ students, need to be represented within a curriculum to feel valued and seen. That process can begin if teachers learn to identify the

null curriculum—the “options students are not afforded [and] the perspectives they never know about” (Eisner, 1985, p. 107). Incorporating those missing perspectives also serves straight and cisgender students, who may begin to recognize their own biases against the LGBTQ+ community. One mechanism for addressing the null curriculum, analyzing literature through a queer lens, fosters students’ critical thinking and analysis skills and enables them to identify and discuss social injustices harming the LGBTQ+ community.

### **Queer Theory**

Queer theory derived from the 1960s gay liberation movement, which fought for equal rights for gays and lesbians and is perhaps most remembered for the Stonewall Riots and the efforts of transgender activist Marsha P. Johnson, who brought LGBTQ+ equality to the forefront of U.S. society. As Nelson (2002) argued, “what made it possible to form a cohesive social movement based on gayness was the notion that gay or lesbian identity expressed an inner universal essence” (p. 46). Essentialism is the idea that every person has a set of characteristics that are necessary to their identity. Being LGBTQ+ is one such characteristic worthy of exploration, celebration, and study. For straight and cisgender students, exploring LGBTQ+ identity offers an opportunity to acknowledge potential bias and identify cultural discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community.

In the wake of riots and protests, the basis of queer theory evolved, especially with Foucault’s (1978) “repressive hypothesis” (p. 10), the argument that sexual repression started in the 19th-century Victorian Era, when, “on the subject of sex, silence became the rule” (p. 4). Society viewed sex as repulsive, taboo, and only for procreation, such that repression became “the fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality,” and one so strong “that we will not be able to free ourselves from it except at

a considerable cost (Foucault, 1978, p. 5). Sexuality, according to Foucault, is a social construct created by the bourgeois class to oppress other socioeconomic classes. Breaking free from this sexual oppression and talking freely about sex and sexuality requires rebelling against societal standards—the only means of achieving political freedom.

This principle applies to the oppressive development of a heteronormative ELA curriculum—one that fails to include LGBTQ+ authors. A heteronormative curriculum oppresses LGBTQ+ students by depriving them of opportunities to learn about authors to whom they can relate and from whom they can discover their own identity. Likewise, with a heteronormative curriculum, heterosexual students lack experiences through which they can identify social injustices oppressing the LGBTQ+ community. By critically studying literature created by LGBTQ+ authors, teachers and students free themselves from the oppressive heteronormative structure of a school environment and curriculum.

Building from Foucault's (1978) foundational critique of heteronormative approaches to and categories of gender and sexuality, this dissertation focuses on queer theory and queer pedagogy. I use *queer* as an umbrella term for anyone in the LGBTQ+ community, following Sumara and Davis (2002), who argued,

queer theory does not ask that pedagogy become sexualized—and furthermore, it begins to interpret the way it is explicitly heterosexualized. [...It] asks that the continued construction of narratives supporting that unruly category 'heterosexual' be constantly interrupted and narrated. (p. 192)

In essence, queer theory and queer pedagogy can empower teachers to combat heteronormative beliefs and rules in the classroom and society and guide students to examine narratives that display the LGBTQ+ community's struggles and identity.

## **Queer Theory in Education**

Queer theory in education can manifest as queer pedagogy, which “challenges all students regardless of their sexual identities because it calls into question the process of normalizing dominant assumptions and beliefs” (Winans, 2006, p. 106). For example, a sociology class could use queer theory to discuss the social construct of gender and how to challenge gender norms in a heteronormative society and culture. Queer theory shaped my study in terms of queer literary criticism. Applied in ELA classrooms, it can help teachers analyze literature through a queer perspective and promote LGBTQ+ inclusion.

A basic definition of queer literary criticism is analyzing a text from a queer perspective, such as offering a critique to challenge heteronormative perspectives. Queer literary criticism has grown from just gay and lesbian studies to encompass so much more, like heteronormative beliefs, gender identity, and gender. As Meyer (2007) argued,

Queer theory goes beyond exploring aspects of gay and lesbian identity and experience. It questions taken-for-granted assumptions about relationships, identity, gender, and sexual orientation. It seeks to explore rigid normalizing categories into possibilities that exist beyond the binaries of man/woman masculine/feminine, student/teacher, gay and straight. (p. 15)

Queer literary criticism offers ELA teachers an opportunity to analyze literature from a marginalized group’s perspective and create a diverse and inclusive classroom.

A few aspects are critical when applying queer literary criticism to the ELA classroom. First, educators must “understand the function of traditional heterosexual gender roles in reinforcing and maintaining harmful power dynamics in school or society” (Meyer, 2007, p. 17). Traditional gender roles, in school environments and

society in general, shape students' actions and beliefs. Teachers can consciously or unconsciously enforce these stereotypical roles, whether by asking boys to help move items, allowing boys to be more aggressive than girls, or telling girls to act more feminine. Teaching literature through a queer perspective can combat these heteronormative beliefs and offer LGBTQ+ students the value of representation.

A second vital aspect to recognize is that queer literary criticism can combat homophobia (Blackburn et al., 2015), a negative attitude or dislike against the gay community. Ultimately, queer literary criticism and queer theory can transform the heteronormative culture of a classroom and school by equipping teachers to “explore traditionally silenced discourses and create spaces for students to examine and challenge the hierarchy of binary identities that is created and supported by schools” (Meyer, 2007, p. 27). In ELA classrooms like mine, queer pedagogy involves discussing literature through a queer lens and enabling students to identify the injustices the LGBTQ+ community consistently endures. However, as Chapter 1 illustrated, learning to take such an instructional approach requires time and intentional effort.

### **Professional Development**

Professional development is an integral part of continuing education for teachers and educational professionals. The continuous learning opportunities available through schools or school districts usually include presentations, workshops, classes, and guest speakers. Because educators face a multitude of challenges and changes in education, they need constant professional development to stay informed, yet professional development seldom centers LGBTQ+ inclusion. In my experience, teachers need help to incorporate LGBTQ+ authors and queer theory into an ELA curriculum.

Scholars have documented how “educators’ participation in creating supportive school environments is inconsistent and often limited by a cultural belief that speaking about LGBTQ issues in any capacity is inappropriate” (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009, as cited in Payne & Smith, 2011, p. 175). In response, a professional development program called “The Reduction of Stigma in Schools” (RSIS) was designed to help educators create a safe and inclusive learning environment for LGBTQ+ students (Payne & Smith, 2011). Professional development usually focuses on classroom management, curriculum, and effective pedagogy but rarely meets the needs of LGBTQ+ students. The RSIS program, in contrast, “creates opportunities to share knowledge and tools with a greater number of educators—many of whom might not know (or want to know) anything about LGBTQ students’ school experiences” (Payne & Smith, 2011, p. 175). Professional development around LGBTQ+ discrimination enhances teachers’ ability to recognize their own internal biases about the LGBTQ+ community and create a safe learning environment for their students. Key principles of professional development include using “an educator-to-educator model;” focusing on all schools, despite teacher resistance; conducting training in the teachers’ environment; using a research-based approach; and providing “adequate workshop time” (Payne & Smith, 2011, p. 176).

Towery (2007) created a year-long professional development program for exploring “teachers’ perceptions of school climate with regard to gender inequity as well as their perceptions of their own efforts to challenge gender inequities in their own classroom” (p. 2). Arguing that teachers need targeted professional development to discuss gender, race, or diversity, the study focused on the difficulties teachers initially had with exercises about sexual orientation. However, the exercises made the teachers

aware of their internal biases about the LGBTQ+ community and how they contributed to a heteronormative classroom environment. Playing “a crucial role in helping them work through feelings of discomfort,” the professional development seminars provided “a forum [where they] questioned their beliefs” and became “aware of ‘how rampant’ homophobia was in their schools” (Towery, 2007, p. 9). More importantly, “some teachers also explicitly linked their increased openness to analyzing their feelings about homosexuality to a growing awareness of how issues of sexual identity might impact their students” (Towery, 2007, p. 9). Towery’s study suggested that creating professional development sessions about LGBTQ+ terminology and issues LGBTQ+ students face could help my colleagues and me identify our own internal biases and become more comfortable addressing the needs of LGBTQ+ students in the classroom.

However, existing scholarship also emphasizes that change cannot happen “without strong leadership and teachers cannot act in support of LGBTQ+ students if they do not feel supported by their administrators” (Payne & Smith, 2011, p. 197). Because teachers may hesitate to introduce queer issues in their classrooms or report LGBTQ+ harassment for fear of administrative reprimand, I recognized the need to tailor professional development to school culture, while attempting to cover several key topics: (a) stigma and risks, (b) connections between school climate and academic success, (c) sites of stigma, (d) heteronormative youth narratives, and (e) tools for change (Payne & Smith, 2011, pp. 189–190). These core elements were integral components of the professional development I facilitated to help my fellow ELA teachers recognize heteronormative ideals and practices within the school community, reflect on the harm



those ideals and practices cause for LGBTQ+ students, and identify ways to combat heteronormativity by adapting ELA curriculum and instruction.

### **Historical Perspective**

Understanding today's heteronormative culture and society requires learning about the oppression LGBTQ+ individuals have faced throughout history. Long-lasting and far-reaching incidents like the Lavender Scare have troubling legacies. Current school policies that target LGBTQ+ students contain echoes of these historical moments.

#### **The Lavender Scare**

At the dawn of the Cold War in 1947, Senator Joseph McCarthy led investigations to remove alleged communists from government jobs and the military. McCarthy's Red Scare agenda also sought to rid those institutions of suspected homosexuals. Supported by FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover, McCarthy characterized homosexual males as "lavender lads, [...] a security threat because they could be blackmailed to provide state secrets to the Soviets" (Facing History and Ourselves, 2021, para. 20). Ensuing interrogations of suspected homosexuals, known as the Lavender Scare, resulted in the harassment and firing of gay and lesbian civil servants and military personnel (Gleason, 2017). Viewed as sinful, mentally ill, perverted, and morally weak, thousands of gay and lesbian workers were fired and many others were found guilty by association.

One of the most widespread and long-lasting attacks on the LGBTQ+ community, the Lavender Scare also extended into the field of education. Between 1959–1964, The Florida Legislative Investigation Committee (FLIC) removed a multitude of gay and lesbian teachers from the classroom based on their perceived homosexuality (Graves, 2007). FLIC began to infiltrate public schools and universities throughout the state,

arguing that “gay men and lesbians were among the 40,000 some schoolteachers in Florida, and the state had thus far not done a good enough job of finding them, firing them, and stripping them of their teaching credentials” (Graves, 2007, p. 8). Although the witch hunt subsided in the 1960s, Graves (2007) noted FLIC’s lasting impact: “Homophobic forces contesting civil rights for gay and lesbian citizens have repeatedly directed their point of attack at gay and lesbian teachers; the effects reverberate throughout the school system as well as in the community at large” (p. 30). This discrimination is still present. For example, Florida’s House of Representatives passed a so-called “Don’t Say Gay Bill” that forbids teachers from discussing LGBTQ individuals or issues and restricts the rights of LGBTQ students, inhibiting inclusion and thus contributing to heteronormative school cultures (Equality Florida, 2022).

Indeed, some 21st-century educators are afraid to be their authentic selves for fear of parental or administrative backlash. The Supreme Court only extended the prohibition of sex discrimination in Title VII of The Civil Rights Act of 1964 to sexual orientation and gender identity in June 2020 (Gruberg, 2020), illustrating the ongoing fight for LGBTQ+ rights. Such lingering heteronormativity is especially evident in schools, where teachers may hesitate to teach works by LGBTQ+ authors or model how to analyze literature through a queer perspective.

### **LGBTQ+ School Policy**

Just as LGBTQ+ teachers have experienced discrimination, LGBTQ+ students are often fearful to come to school, especially when school policies designed to address harassment, intimidation, and bullying do not extend specific protections to LGBTQ+ students. In a recent nationwide survey, GLSEN found that 79.6% of LGBTQ+

respondents “reported feeling unsafe at school [...] because of their sexual orientation or their gender expression” (Kosciw et al., 2020, p. 16). Times have not changed much since the era of “Don’t Ask; Don’t Tell,” when LGBTQ+ students felt pressured to “deny who they are—a message that too often leads to self-hatred and a fractured sense of identity” (Bochenek & Brown, 2001, p. 2). As one description from the period explained,

Some school officials blame the students being abused of provoking the attacks because they ‘flaunt’ their identity. Other school officials justify their inaction by arguing that students who ‘insist’ on being gay must ‘get used to it.’ And finally, some school officials encourage or participate in the abuse by publicly taunting or condemning the students for not being ‘normal.’ (Bochenek & Brown, 2001, p. 2)

Over 2 decades later, I still witness similar dynamics in my school as LGBTQ+ students do not feel represented in the school environment or curriculum. School should be a safe environment for all students, but heteronormative policies and practices can make school unbearable for LGBTQ+ students.

With the introduction of Title IX, LGBTQ+ students started to see some protection. A federal law that bans discrimination based on sex for schools that receive federal funding, Title IX now “not only includes discrimination for being a girl or boy, but also includes sexual harassment and discrimination for failing to conform to gender stereotypes” (Lambda Legal, n.d., para. 4). This shift protects transgender and gender nonconforming students from being bullied, forced to use the bathroom that correlates with their biological sex, called by the wrong name or pronoun, or reprimanded for wearing certain styles of clothing. A recent press release confirmed this expanded protection, citing “Title IX’s prohibition on discrimination on the basis of sex to include:

(1) discrimination based on sexual orientation; and (2) discrimination based on gender identity” (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, para. 1). Therefore, school districts must treat transgender students according to their gender identity, encompassing locker rooms, restrooms, names/pronouns, and dress codes. Such policies and practices allow transgender and gender nonconforming students to feel safer in their school environment, yet an inclusive literature curriculum would go even further by promoting different perspectives, teaching students about the ongoing fight for LGBTQ+ rights, and preparing students to act against social injustices.

Indeed, Title IX is insufficient against widespread petitioning to ban books with LGBTQ+ characters and themes. In my state, parents in the North Hunterdon Regional School District demanded that the Board of Education remove *Lawn Boy* and *Gender Queer* from school libraries because the books allegedly “cause divisiveness and trauma to the children” (Makin, 2021, para. 3). These incidents made my action research even more urgent. In addition to helping my ELA colleagues become more familiar with LGBTQ+ terminology, history, and issues students face, I sought to provide the kind of targeted professional development that would enable them to join with me in combating the broader heteronormative school culture.

### **Related Research**

To prepare for my study, I consulted research related to the concepts of queer theory, null curriculum, professional development, and inclusivity. Several recent studies focused on heteronormative high school cultures. In addition to illustrating the broader reach of my problem of practice, they informed the design of my own research.

For example, Burdge et al. (2013) sought to identify barriers to inclusivity within the context of California's Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful Education Act, which required all public schools to incorporate information about the roles LGBTQ+ individuals played in U.S. history, society, and culture. Interested in whether the new curriculum would decrease harassment, bullying, and intimidation of the LGBTQ+ community and create a more welcoming and less threatening school environment, the researchers convened a focus group of students from four high schools who identified as LGBTQ+ and examined "school climate, student well-being, learning, and achievement" (Burdge et al., 2013, p. 6). The four schools also completed a climate survey before and after implementing the new curriculum, and lack of support was a cross-cutting theme. In two of the schools, a lack of district-level and community support hindered implementation of the curriculum, whereas the other two schools cited low funding and budget cuts as hindrances. Arguing that inclusivity "in any single subject improves school climate," the authors maintained that "a broad, integrated approach to implementation across the school likely has the greatest impact on school climate" (Burdge et al., 2013, p. 31). Although my study only included ELA teachers, it could be a decisive step toward addressing heteronormativity throughout the school.

In another article, Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2015) discussed "a range of theoretical and pedagogical tools to offer teachers multiple ways of addressing LGBTQ+ topics in their variously situated classrooms" (p. 436). Addressing ELA teachers' potential for supporting students' social, emotional, and mental well-being, the authors identified three promising approaches. First, teachers can be more inclusive by simply reading books that include LGBTQ+ characters, thereby offering "powerful windows and

mirrors for students and disrupt[ing] the single story that only straight people exist” (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015, p. 438). Next, ELA educators can read straight books through a queer lens. Drawing on the concept of queer theory, “teachers and students can reflect on the systems that normalize some forms of sexuality and gender identity/expression while marginalizing others” (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015, p. 438). Finally, Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2015) suggested applying a queer lens to queer texts, which allows students to “draw attention to [...] the consequences those representations have. It encourages readers to remember that even when representations are present, attentions must be paid to the systems that create those representations” (p. 442). In other words, Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan demonstrated multiple ways for ELA teachers to eliminate the null curriculum that operates when students only encounter straight, cisgender characters. By analyzing straight books from a queer perspective and using queer theory to analyze LGBTQ+ literature, all students can identify and discuss the oppressive nature of heteronormativity.

Another study sought to learn about students’ experiences with an inclusive curriculum, specifically how it “challenges normalcy or challenges the reproduction of norms” (Snapp et al., 2015, p. 251). The researchers recruited 26 high school students with diverse racial/ethnic, sexual, and gender identities from California’s Gay Straight Alliance Network. Participating in focus groups conducted by telephone, they discussed 8–10 open-ended questions pertaining to “the impact of LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum on their lives” (Snapp, 2015, p. 252). Using a grounded theory approach, Snapp et al. (2015) drew on social justice theory, queer theory, and critical race theory to discuss how an inclusive curriculum “has the potential to create an equitable learning environment” (p.

249), identifying what classes were more prone to discuss LGBTQ+ issues and texts, what kinds of lessons promoted LGBTQ+ inclusion, and whether students had opportunities to discuss oppression. They found that social sciences and humanities courses only addressed LGBTQ+ issues as a stand-alone lesson and students had few opportunities to discuss relevant social injustices. For example, when a history class discussed civil rights movements, the teacher did not include LGBTQ+ protests, to the disappointment of many LGBTQ+ and heterosexual students. Snapp and colleagues (2015) attributed these omissions to “homophobia or transphobia, a lack of training, ignorance, or even fear of how others (i.e., parents or school administration) may react” (p. 255), but such instances of the null curriculum send a message to all students that ignoring LGBTQ+ issues are acceptable. Therefore, my study incorporated targeted professional development.

Doing nothing is not an option, for as Adelman and Woods (2006) argued, “Schools can be hostile places where heterosexism and homophobia are manifestations of an ideological system or a worldview that denies the validity of LGBTQ persons and assumes the superiority of heterosexuals” (p. 6). To determine why many young adults do not intervene when witnessing harassment targeted at LGBTQ+ students, Adelman and Woods (2006) asked, “How do students who recognize the negative effects of name-calling and harassment based on sexual orientation explain their lack of intervention?” (p. 5). An action research method enabled them to respond to the problem “within existing school-based social change organizations” (Adelman & Woods, 2006, p. 10). First, the authors studied the GLSEN Local School Climate Survey for Arizona, a subsection of GLSEN’s National School Climate Survey that documented the homophobic, racist, and

sexist comments high school students hear in school. Then, they chose survey participants from two sessions at Anytown, which holds week-long retreats “to build awareness of the self and the other among high school students through intensive exploration of social identities such as gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and disability” (Adelman & Woods, 2006, p. 11). A diverse sample of 46 students participated, providing four explanations for why people may not intervene:

First, they described institutional norms and consequences that were perceived as too risky to challenge. Second, they invoked pragmatic rationales [...] due to the ubiquitous nature of such remarks. Third, they articulated personal concerns about their relationships and the loss of social status. And fourth, when adults reinforced unacceptable student remarks, participants illustrated the combined effect of institutional, pragmatic, and personal rationales. (Adelman & Woods, 2006, p. 15)

In response, Adelman and Woods suggested implementing more inclusive curriculum to help students identify social injustices, training faculty and staff on LGBTQ+ issues and how to intervene when homophobic or transphobic remarks occur and ensuring administrative and district support. Likewise, my study recognized teachers’ responsibility to ensure a safer and more inclusive school culture.

Fulfilling this responsibility may require confronting teachers’ hesitation to teach LGBTQ+ literature or to apply queer theory. Thein (2013) sought to explore such resistance among ELA teachers with ostensibly “anti-homophobic views” (p. 169). To explain these conflicted beliefs, Thein (2013) drew parallels to “a ‘colorblind’ stance towards racism” (p. 170), arguing that a failure to include LGBTQ+ issues and texts contributes to a heteronormative and unsafe environment, regardless of teachers’ beliefs.



Using an online discussion board for ELA teachers in a master's course on multicultural literature, Thein (2013) collected data from 20 participants and coded their claims into six categories: "Appropriateness, Displaced Negative Stance, Force of Facts, Reversal, Fairness, and Ability/Preparedness" (pp. 172–176). Thein used "Appropriateness" to refer to teachers' association of LGBTQ+ literature with sex, deemed inappropriate in an ELA classroom. Claims categorized under "Displaced Negative Stance" attributed objection to LGBTQ+ texts "to ambiguous unnamed 'others' who would oppose such classroom content typically based on religious, political, or moral grounds" (Thein, 2013, p. 173). Claims under "Force of Facts" argued that teaching LGBTQ+ issues may threaten teachers' careers, "suggesting that such discussion is irrelevant given policies, procedures, and even laws" (Thein, 2013, p. 175). Excuses categorized under "Reversal," like those under "Displaced Negative Stance," argued that although inclusivity is good, in theory, it may cause more harm than good to LGBTQ+ students by increasing bullying. Claims under the "Fairness" category suggested inclusivity "discriminates against students and parents who hold anti-gay views" (Thein, 2013, p. 176). Finally, the "Ability/Preparedness" category applied to teachers who felt they had insufficient training for teaching LGBTQ+ texts "and would therefore offend students and risk their jobs" if they attempted to be more inclusive (Thein, 2013, p. 176). Consequently, Thein's study supported my aim to provide targeted professional development.

In a similar study to address ELA teachers' comfort with and awareness of LGBTQ+ literature, Page (2017a) used an online survey to recruit a large sample of middle and high school teachers. Questions elicited their "experiences with their media center, their views on curriculum, [...and] their priorities regarding literature selection"

(Page, 2017a, p. 6). Page found that many ELA teachers were comfortable but lacked knowledge of some resources available to them and wanted specific guidance with terminology and how to choose quality texts. In response, Page (2017a) recommended illustrative cases studies and sample units, especially those focused on “meeting standards through using diverse texts, instruction that attempts to ‘speak back’ to heteronormative practices” (p. 13). By answering this call, my study may eliminate other ELA teachers’ fear and anxiety over teaching LGBTQ+ authors.

Likewise, Payne and Smith’s (2011) study of the RSIS program, which I introduced earlier, is a useful model. The authors illustrated how curriculum, especially in ELA, can “reflect only the contributions of dominant groups and privileging of hegemonic gender roles” (Payne & Smith, 2011, p. 175). Such unsafe and unwelcoming conditions for LGBTQ+ students inspired professional development “to empower educators to create supportive learning environments” (Payne & Smith, 2011, p. 174). Crucially, the program was an “educator-to-educator model,” which could “speak to how the workshop content fits with the day-to-day operations of school” (Payne & Smith, 2011, p. 176). The sessions aimed to “increase teacher competence around educational issues” (Payne & Smith, 2011, p. 177) and provided specific recommendations, such as focusing on stigma and risk, making connections between school climate and academic success, and emphasizing how heteronormative behaviors negatively impact LGBTQ+ students. These recommendations informed my approach to this action research study.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 2 elaborated on my problem of practice by exploring how heteronormativity negatively impacts LGBTQ+ students and broader school cultures.

This action research study built on this existing literature. Guided by the specific examples of educators and administrators who sought to disrupt such policies and practices through effective professional development, I constructed the study design that appears in Chapter 3.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter justifies the qualitative approach I used to collect and analyze data. Action research was the basis of my research design as I was “interested in facilitating change in [my] work [and] community” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 4). My research was also descriptive, aiming “to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics” (Nassaji, 2015, p. 129). As I explained in Chapter 1, New Jersey requires LGBTQ+ history, issues, and terminology in all curriculums but has yet to provide corresponding professional development. I asserted that with sufficient guidance, my fellow ELA educators could become more comfortable with LGBTQ+ terminology, history, students, and issues, so we can apply queer theory and other inclusive practices to make our school climate less heteronormative. As a reminder, my research questions were:

1. How does targeted professional development impact ELA teachers’ knowledge of queer theory?
2. How does targeted professional development impact ELA teachers’ comfort with LGBTQ+ terminology and teaching from a queer perspective?

These questions convey my aim to provide the tools and resources my colleagues needed to improve our collective ability to address the school’s heteronormative culture. As Najarro (2021) noted, “A lot of educators didn’t receive a ton of training within teacher preparation programs on how to foster such conversations. In many cases, teachers never learned about LGBTQ topics when they were students themselves” (para. 8). My

professional development sessions could offer this missing training for my colleagues, who could then better support LGBTQ+ students inside and outside of the classroom.

### **Sampling Plan**

Convenience sampling (Efron & Ravid, 2013) is an appropriate method for action research wherein researchers investigate and seek to improve their own communities, enlisting nearby participants. My problem of practice warranted creating effective professional development to help my fellow ELA teachers become more comfortable and knowledgeable discussing LGBTQ+ issues in the classroom and teaching from a queer perspective. I anticipated a sample of seven to 10 colleagues who teach ninth- to 12th-grade literature classes while excluding Advanced Placement teachers, whose curriculum differs from the district's. To recruit participants, I e-mailed all 16 eligible teachers in my school and 50% ( $n = 8$ ) accepted. I describe them in Chapter 4.

The invitation e-mail (Appendix A) introduced my research topic and shared my overall goal to promote a more inclusive school climate. As an insider, I suspected my ELA colleagues would be interested in learning more about how to teach literature through a queer lens and eager to improve their ability to respond to issues affecting LGBTQ+ students at our school. However, if fewer than seven people responded, I planned to send the invitation to ELA teachers at another high school in my district to gain more participants. If more than 10 people responded, I planned to choose 10 participants at random. Hitting my target sample size was important because fewer than seven participants would not offer enough meaningful data to promote inclusivity, whereas more than 10 would inhibit my ability to address each participant's needs. The e-mail invitation assured participants they could withdraw at any point in the study. If

participants chose to withdraw after attending at least one session, I planned to retain their data with their permission. If a participant could not attend a session but wanted to continue with the study, I planned to have them complete any outstanding surveys and present the material from the missing session(s) to them one-on-one.

### **Setting**

This study took place at Lenape High School, where I have been an ELA teacher for 15 years. Lenape Regional High School District, located in Burlington County, a densely populated area in southern New Jersey, serves approximately 6,891 students in Grades 9–12 from eight surrounding counties. The district's four high schools and one alternative high school had a combined total of 611 teachers and administrators at the time of this study, and Lenape High School had 166 teachers, 8 administrators, and 1,875 students, about 10% of whom identified as LGBTQ+. I have a longstanding relationship with the administrators as an out, nonbinary, queer teacher who has mentored LGBTQ+ students and discussed LGBTQ+ issues with colleagues during in-service events.

### **Data Collection**

I used three data collection methods throughout the study. Anonymous Likert-scale surveys and open-ended surveys helped me determine participants' comfort level before and after each professional development session to assess the effectiveness of each session. I also kept a researcher journal to record field notes during the sessions, capture my observations of participants' comfort level, and document specific discussion topics.

I conducted five total sessions during the first semester of the 2022–2023 school year, which ranged from August through January (Table 3.1). Each session lasted 30–45 minutes and occurred in my classroom during Common Planning time, when the entire

ELA department has a prep period. Using a Likert scale, participants rated their comfort with LGBTQ+ terminology, gender identity terminology, identifying examples of heteronormativity, and using queer theory in their classroom. The scale ranged from 0 to 3: Not Comfortable, Slightly Comfortable, Moderately Comfortable, and Highly Comfortable. Once each participant completed a pre-session survey, I developed the session to cater to my colleagues' comfort levels. I also used public data to compile district information, such as the number of teachers, students, and administrators, and spoke with the Gender Sexuality Alliance advisor for information pertaining to LGBTQ+ students at Lenape High School.

Table 3.1 *Research Timeline*

Phase	Duration/timing	Major tasks
1	3 weeks, Aug.–Sept. 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruit participants</li> <li>• Administer Survey 1</li> <li>• Plan/facilitate Session 1: Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation, and LGBTQ+ History</li> <li>• Readminister Survey 1</li> <li>• Complete journal entries</li> </ul>
2	2 weeks, Late Sept. 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administer Survey 2</li> <li>• Plan/facilitate Session 2: Heteronormativity</li> <li>• Readminister Survey 2</li> <li>• Complete journal entries</li> </ul>
3	2 weeks, Early Oct. 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administer Survey 3</li> <li>• Plan/facilitate Session 3: Queer Theory</li> <li>• Readminister Survey 3</li> <li>• Complete journal entries</li> </ul>
4	2 weeks, Late Oct. 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administer Survey 4</li> <li>• Plan/facilitate Session 4: Incorporating LGBTQ+ Authors</li> <li>• Readminister Survey 4</li> <li>• Complete journal entries</li> </ul>
5	2 weeks, early Nov. 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan/facilitate Session 5: <i>Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe</i> Lesson Plans</li> <li>• Administer Survey 5</li> <li>• Complete journal entries</li> </ul>

I presented Sessions 1–3 using Google Slides and gave each participant a copy of the Google Slides to use for notes and discussion. For Session 4, I gave participants a list of LGBTQ+ authors along with suggestions for incorporating the authors’ sexual orientation into their ELA lessons. For Session 5, I focused on *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, a text from the current curriculum, to demonstrate how to teach from a queer perspective.

### **Surveys**

Using Likert-scale surveys was effective because they are easy to understand and present data in a clear and concise manner. The results helped me draw quick conclusions about participants’ comfort levels so I could create professional development sessions to increase their comfort. Survey 1 (Appendix B) asked participants to rate their comfort with sexual orientation and gender identity terminology. The initial data informed Session 1, which contextualized definitions and concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity through a discussion of LGBTQ+ history. After the session, I readministered Survey 1 to measure any change in participants’ comfort.

Before Session 2, I used another Likert-scale survey (Appendix C) to measure participants’ comfort by defining heteronormativity and identifying it in society and at school. I constructed the second session based on the responses, providing societal examples and guiding participants to identify examples in our school environment. After the session, I readministered Survey 2 to measure any change in their comfort.

As a third Likert-scale survey, Survey 3 (Appendix D) enabled me to address participants’ comfort with defining queer theory, concepts of queer theory, and analyzing literature through a queer lens. I used the results to design Session 3 around the concept



of queer theory and analyzing literature through a queer lens. As with the prior sessions, readministering Survey 3 gave me insight regarding the effectiveness of the session.

Before Session 4, I shifted to an open-ended survey format, which allowed a deeper understanding of participants' authentic feelings and attitudes about the professional development sessions. Survey 4 (Appendix E) focused on participants' existing knowledge of LGBTQ+ authors and literature in the curriculum, their comfort with teaching such authors and works through a queer perspective, and what specifically they were hoping to get out of the session. Informed by their responses, the session focused on identifying LGBTQ+ authors in the current ELA curriculum and how to introduce these authors and their sexual orientation to students. Afterward, I readministered the survey to gain insight on the effectiveness and clarity of the session.

Finally, Session 5 focused on sample lessons for teaching specific works through a queer lens. Because I had already researched participants' comfort with queer theory, I did not administer a pre-session survey. After the session, I asked participants to respond to open-ended questions on Survey 5 (Appendix F), both to assess the session and determine whether participants wanted or needed additional professional development.

### **Researcher Journal**

To supplement my survey data, I maintained a journal in a password-protected Google folder. The folder also contained handouts pertaining to the Google Slides presentations, literary works from our ELA curriculum, and sample lessons. The Google Doc serving as the journal contained a mix of unstructured and structured entries.

Unstructured entries enable researchers to record what they perceive as “valuable or important” information (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 125). My unstructured entries were

created during the professional development sessions while listening and observing the participants' interactions with each other when discussing their comfort with LGBTQ+ authors and themes, queer theory, and putting themselves in the mindset of a student who is analyzing literature from a queer perspective. Structured entries tend to be "logged weekly at specific times" (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 126). I logged my structured entries after each professional development session to display my thoughts on the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of each session.

### **Data Analysis**

My initial approach to data analysis for each Likert-scale survey used descriptive research methods to "represent the current conditions of the topic under investigation" (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 45). Analyzing the pre-session surveys helped me make informed decisions when designing the professional development sessions. The post-session surveys were also conducive to a descriptive approach. Creating descriptive summaries in the form of bar graphs gave me a sense of whether each session had a positive impact on participants' comfort.

To analyze the open-ended survey responses, I used thematic coding, "a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights" (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2). Listing themes and patterns in my researcher journal, I sought a correlation between my participants' hesitation to teach queer theory or LGBTQ+ terminology and the group's comfort level over the course of the professional development sessions. In other words, I looked for common themes throughout the open-ended survey and journal data. Including both structured and unstructured journal entries allowed me the opportunity to

thoroughly examine my participants' knowledge, comfort, and potential hesitation with LGBTQ+ inclusion in their classroom.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I anticipated my participants may be uncomfortable with admitting their own lack of knowledge of LGBTQ+ terminology and queer theory to an openly queer, nonbinary colleague. I attempted to create a safe space by discussing that few, if any, college or university classes discuss sexual orientation, gender identity, or queer theory in their teacher education programs (Kearns et al., 2014). I also affirmed their participation by emphasizing how we could work together to challenge the school's heteronormative culture. As an additional method to put participants at ease, I collected and stored all data in my private, password-protected Google Drive. The survey responses were anonymous, and I used pseudonyms throughout this dissertation. The participants never saw their colleagues' open-ended survey responses, but they saw and conversed with each other during the professional development sessions (i.e., I could only guarantee confidentiality up to a point). The initial invitation (Appendix A) explained these aspects of the study, and all surveys (Appendix B–F) reminded participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

### **Validity and Reliability**

My research design focused on action research with the goal being to promote a more inclusive school climate. Open-ended survey questions allowed participants to gauge their comfort levels with terminology and queer theory and to express any hesitation toward teaching LGBTQ+ literature and analyzing literature through a queer lens. The open-ended survey questions also gave my participants the opportunity to

evaluate my professional development sessions and discuss concepts, ideas, or sample lessons that were effective or ineffective.

My decision to allow the teachers to express their views anonymously through surveys without the fear of being reprimanded by administrators contributes to the data's trustworthiness. Also, because each survey reiterated participants' right to opt out of the research at any point, readers can trust that I minimized coercion. The transparent positionality statement I provided in Chapter 1 also contributes to my study's trustworthiness, showing I used my life experiences as a source of knowledge about the power of my privilege to effect a positive change in my school on behalf of LGBTQ+ students. My firsthand knowledge of the discrimination and oppression the LGBTQ+ community experiences daily fueled my drive to promote queer representation in the ELA curriculum.

Because my colleagues' perspectives were also important to the success of my study, I engaged in respondent validation by soliciting feedback on "preliminary or emerging findings" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). Employing this validity strategy throughout the study ensured the professional development sessions correlated with my colleagues' concerns and experiences, thus increasing the likelihood that they will incorporate queer theory and LGBTQ+ topics in their classrooms.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 3 elaborated on the methods I selected to create, facilitate, and assess professional development sessions for my fellow ELA teachers to learn more about queer theory and LGBTQ+ terminology, history, authors, and literature. By improving their ability to implement an inclusive curriculum, I hoped to combat the heteronormative

culture that excludes LGBTQ+ students at our school. Chapter 4 presents the results of my efforts.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

Through action research, I aimed to combat heteronormativity at my high school by promoting a more inclusive curriculum and instruction. Specifically, I facilitated five professional development sessions focusing on LGBTQ+ terminology, LGBTQ+ history, heteronormativity, queer theory, and implementing queer theory in ELA and assessed the sessions' impact on eight of my ELA colleagues. The research questions were:

1. How does targeted professional development impact ELA teachers' knowledge of queer theory?
2. How does targeted professional development impact ELA teachers' comfort with LGBTQ+ terminology and teaching from a queer perspective?

This chapter presents my analysis of pre and post survey data and the observations and reflections I recorded in my researcher journal.

#### **Background of Participants**

Table 4.1 presents participants' demographic information, using pseudonyms to introduce each teacher's educational background, years of experience, and teaching load. At Lenape, honors classes are a level above accelerated—more in-depth, taught at a faster pace, and designed for students who are above grade level. Accelerated classes, a step below honors courses, are designed for students at grade level. College prep classes, a step below accelerated classes, are designed for students who are below grade level. All ELA courses focus on critical thinking, analysis, and writing skills.

Table 4.1 *Participants*

Name	Highest degree	Years at Lenape	Grade and level
Joe	master's, secondary ed.	19	9, 10, and 11 College Prep
Deb	master's, curriculum and instruction	14	9 Honors and College Prep
Jackie	master's, educational technology	8	9 Honors 11 Accelerated and College Prep
Jaime	master's, education	16	9 and 12 Accelerated
Casey	master's, special ed. with English concentration	5	11 and 12 Accelerated
Riley	bachelor's, English and secondary ed.	4	9 Honors and College Prep 11 Accelerated
Michele	master's, special ed. with English concentration	6	10 and 12 College Prep
Beth	bachelor's, English and secondary ed.	4	9 Accelerated and College Prep 10 Honors

### Intervention

Professional development, by “creating spaces for educators to engage with texts that are meant to represent complex identities” (Parker & Bach, 2009, p. 97), can equip ELA teachers to resist heteronormativity, apply queer theory, and support the LGBTQ+ community. As an action researcher, I recognized my colleagues were hesitant to incorporate LGBTQ+ authors and themes in the curriculum and created targeted professional development to help them identify potential curricular and instructional changes, as well as to address their fear of teaching from a queer perspective. I wanted to empower them to have more impactful and informative discussions with their classes about LGBTQ+ issues within the Lenape community and society in general.

As Chapter 3 indicated, I created and facilitated a total of five sessions throughout the study. Each session focused on a specific topic relating to my research questions. For

the first three sessions, pre-session surveys featured a Likert scale to assess participants' comfort. After creating and facilitating a session based on the results, I readministered the same surveys, as the post-session data would reveal any change in participants' comfort. For Sessions 4 and 5, I used open-ended survey questions to gain a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of the professional development on participants' comfort and knowledge. This section provides a phase-by-phase narrative of the intervention period. For each phase, I explain how the pre-session survey data informed my preparation for facilitating the session, use my research journal data to describe how the session unfolded, and compare the pre and post survey results.

### **Phase 1**

The first professional development session focused on LGBTQ+ terminology and gender identity terminology. I also included a brief LGBTQ+ history lesson. I wanted participants to understand basic gender identity and sexual orientation terminology, as well as LGBTQ+ history, before moving to other topics.

### ***Pre-Session Results***

Table 4.2 presents the initial results for Survey 1 (Appendix B). Question 1 focused on participants' comfort with defining LGBTQ+ terminology. Two participants (25%) selected 1, and six (75%) selected 2. Question 2 asked about participants' comfort with identifying terms like cisgender and transgender. The responses were mixed: five participants (62.5%) chose 1, two (25%) chose 2, and one (12.5%) chose 3. However, when asked about terms like pangender, genderfluid, or genderqueer, three participants (35%) chose 0, and five participants (62.5%) chose 1. For Question 4, which centered on participants' comfort with discussing LGBTQ+ terminology in class, their responses



were evenly distributed, suggesting slight or moderate comfort. Finally, Question 5 measured participants' comfort with discussing gender identity terminology in class. All eight participants (100%) chose 1, meaning they were only slightly comfortable.

Table 4.2 *Pre-Session Frequency Table for Survey 1*

Question	Not	Slightly	Moderately	Highly
1. How comfortable are you with defining LGBTQ+ terminology such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and asexual?		2	6	
2. How comfortable are you with defining gender identity terminology such as cisgender and transgender?		5	2	1
3. How comfortable are you with defining gender identity terminology such as pangender, genderfluid, genderqueer?	3	5		
4. How comfortable are you with discussing LGBTQ+ terminology in the classroom?		4	4	
5. How comfortable are you with discussing gender identity terminology in the classroom?		8		

The pre-session survey results guided how I structured the first professional development session. Because most participants were already knowledgeable about LGBTQ+ and basic gender identity terminology, I chose to define the terms briefly only to solidify their knowledge. However, responses to Questions 2 and 3 revealed less comfort with defining more precise gender identity terminology such as genderqueer and genderfluid, and responses to Questions 4 and 5 indicated participants were hesitant to discuss gender identity in the classroom. Therefore, I planned to focus Session 1 on clearly defining these terms and emphasizing the need to discuss them in ELA classrooms, with help from a gender unicorn visual (Appendix G).

### ***Session 1: Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation, and LGBTQ+ History***

I began Session 1 by sharing that 75% of the participants felt fairly comfortable defining LGBTQ+ terminology but few were comfortable teaching such terms in the

classroom and asked their thoughts. Joe mentioned that words like *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, and *transgender* are common throughout social media and society. He has no problem discussing the concepts openly in his classroom, despite concern that “parents or administrators will not approve,” but he noted only the Grade 9 curriculum includes a novel with LGBTQ+ themes. Deb, a Grade 9 teacher, shared her worry about teaching *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, a novel featuring two gay youth in the 1980s. Despite being “excited to add some diversity into the curriculum,” she stated, “I’m afraid parents will think I am pushing some sort of agenda, or they will not allow their child to read the novel because of the LGBTQ+ themes.” She added, “While the book is in the curriculum, I don’t think administrators will support us if a parent complains.” Many participants, including Joe, agreed with Deb’s statement. He also mentioned that while he wants to incorporate more LGBTQ+ history and literature into the classroom, he is hesitant to do so because he does not feel he has enough knowledge.

When I asked about my participants’ discomfort with defining gender identity terms such as transgender, genderqueer, and genderfluid, Michele stated, “I’ve heard of these terms; however, it is hard for me to feel confident explaining them because I get confused, especially between genderfluid, nonbinary, and pansexual.” Four other teachers agreed and discussed their hesitation to even bring up gender identity terminology in the classroom because they lack confidence and do not want to offend or confuse students. Because the percentage of participants who were uncomfortable with gender identity terminology was high, I used more specific examples within the Google Slides presentation and relied on the gender unicorn diagram (Appendix G), a tool for illustrating gender, to help my colleagues decipher the terminology. We discussed the

difference between biological sex and gender, how gender identity is fluid, and how people are romantically or physically attracted to one another. Beth credited the visual for helping her to understand the difference between sex assigned at birth and gender identity. She mentioned that the description of each category on the unicorn was “clear and concise, making it easier to grasp difficult concepts.”

The second half of Session 1 focused on a short video discussing the Lavender Scare. Beth and Michele, who teach 10th grade, immediately noticed a connection to Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* and made a plan to incorporate the video when introducing the play to foster student discussion about McCarthyism as an attack on anyone who did not follow societal guidelines. Casey commented that such discrimination is still happening today, given numerous anti-LGBTQ+ laws, anti-transgender laws, and the possibility of The Supreme Court overturning gay marriage. She stated, “It is still considered un-American to be gay, bi, trans, queer, or anything that combats society’s construct of gender today and unfortunately we have many laws to prove that.”

Overall, Session 1 was impactful because I gained an understanding of the participants’ hesitation to discuss LGBTQ+ issues and literature in class. They all saw the need for more inclusive instruction. However, fear of not being supported by parents and administrators seemed to hinder their ability to teach from a queer perspective.

### ***Post-Session Results***

As Figure 4.1 shows, the post-session survey captured an increase in participants’ comfort with defining LGBTQ+ terminology. No participants chose 1, compared to the pre-session frequency of 2. Three participants (37.5%) answered with a 2, compared to

the pre-session frequency of 6, while six participants (62.5%) answered with a 3. In other words, all eight participants felt moderately or highly comfortable.

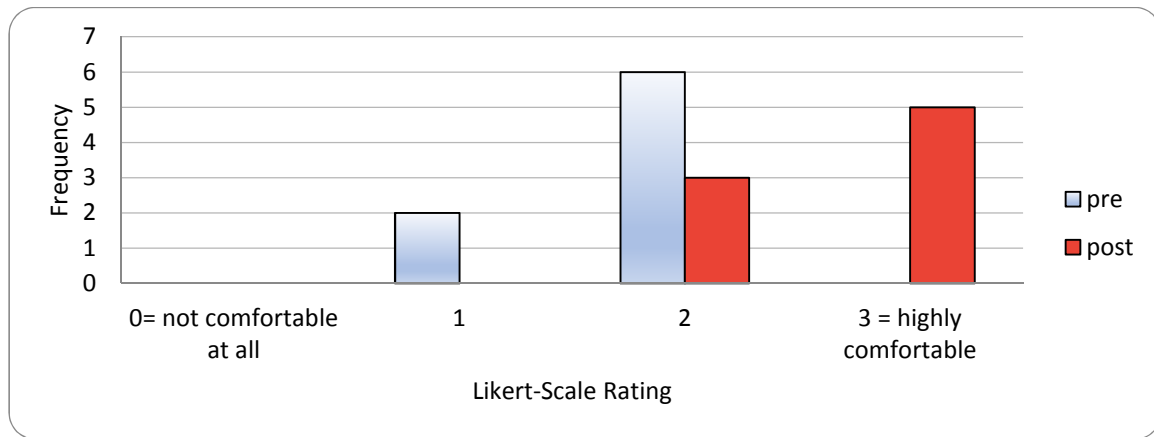


Figure 4.1 *Comparison of Survey 1 Results for Question 1*

As far as comfort with terms like cisgender or transgender, the participants were split. Four (50%) answered with a 2, and four (50%) answered with a 3, yet the session seems to have made an impact (Figure 4.2). Prior to Session 1, five participants chose 1 for the same question, meaning they were slightly comfortable; two chose 2, indicating moderate comfort; and only one chose a 3, suggesting a high level of comfort.

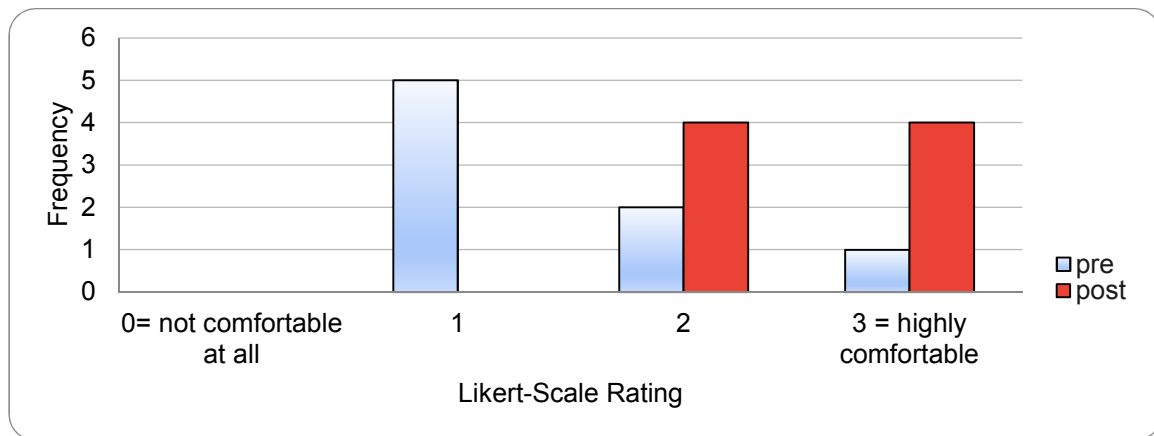


Figure 4.2 *Comparison of Survey 1 Results for Question 2*

However, when asked about their comfort with defining terms such as pangender, genderfluid, or genderqueer, one participant (12.5%) answered with a 1, five participants

(75%) answered with a 2, and only one participant (12.5%) answered with a 3. Figure 4.3 places these results in context with the pre-session results. Overall, most participants felt more comfortable identifying more difficult gender identity terms after Session 1, even though only one participant achieved a high level of comfort.

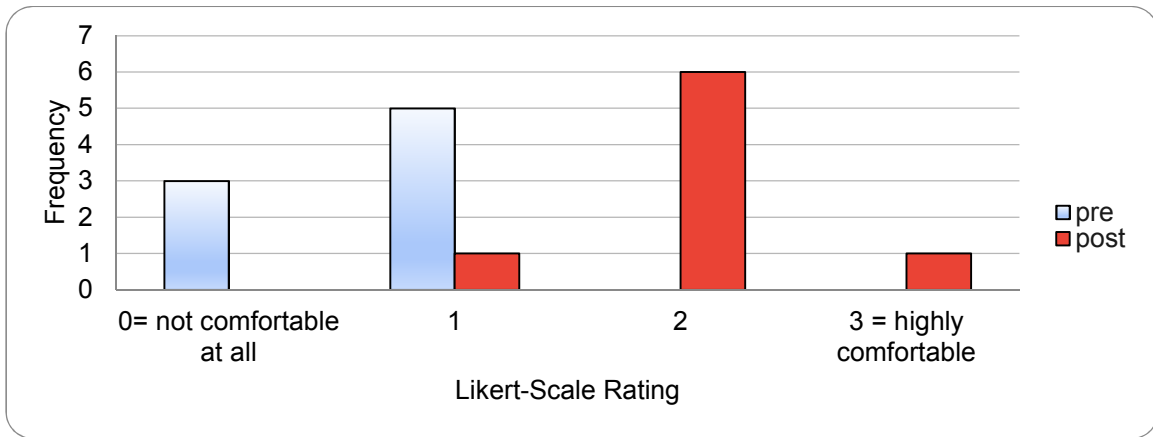


Figure 4.3 *Comparison of Survey 1 Results for Question 3*

The group also displayed increased comfort with LGBTQ+ terminology in the classroom. As Figure 4.4 shows, prior to Session 1, the participants were split in terms of slight and moderate comfort. After the session, four (50%) again chose 2, although not necessarily the same four, while four (50%) achieved a high level of comfort.

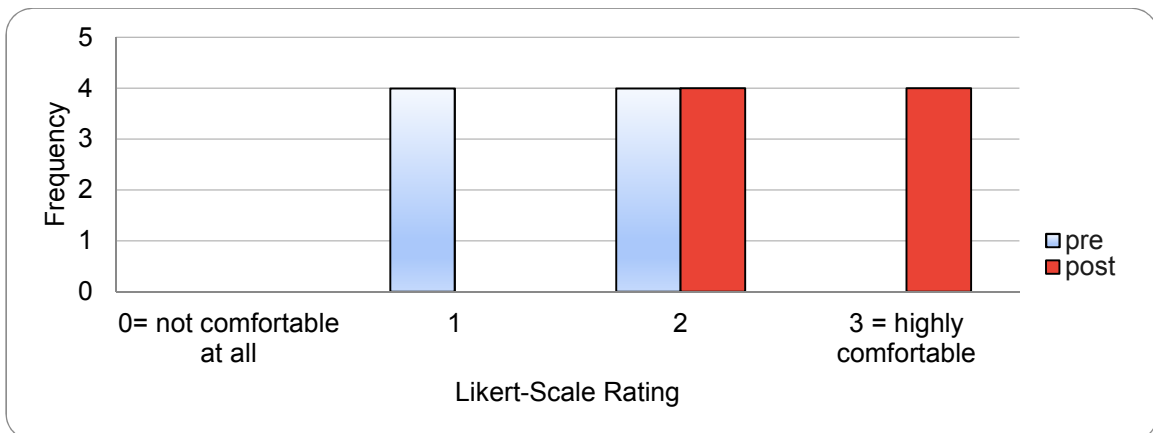


Figure 4.4 *Comparison of Survey 1 Results for Question 4*

Finally, as Figure 4.5 shows, when asked about their comfort with discussing gender identity terminology in the classroom, one participant (12.5%) selected 1, five (62.5%) selected 2, and two (25%) selected 3. Prior to Session 1, all eight participants selected 1. The gender unicorn visual (Appendix G) likely led to the overall increase.

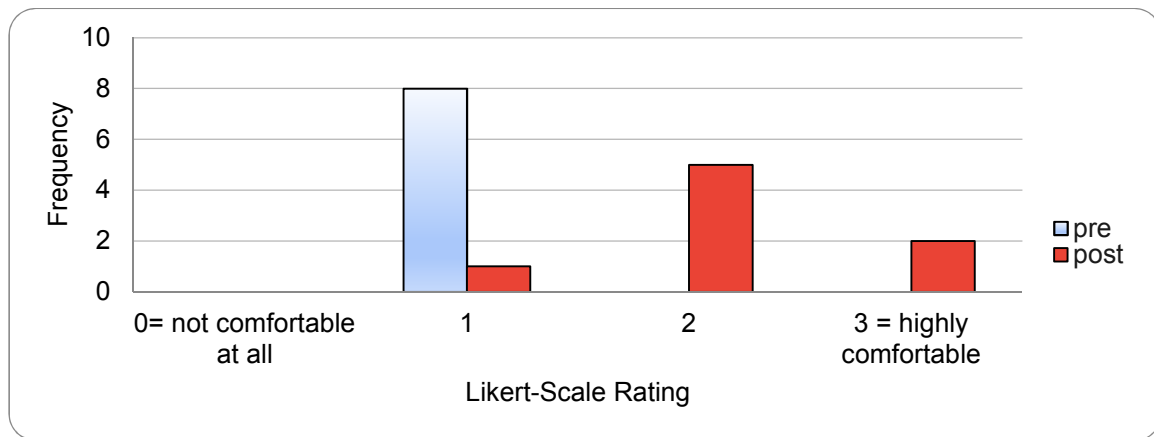


Figure 4.5 *Comparison of Survey 1 Results for Question 5*

## Phase 2

For the second professional development session, focused on heteronormativity, I wanted to gauge my ELA colleagues' comfort not only with defining and discussing heteronormativity but also identifying it within Lenape's culture and environment and society in general. Identifying heteronormative practices within a school culture and working to change those practices can help LGBTQ+ students not only feel more comfortable but also free to express their sexual orientation or gender identity without fear of being reprimanded by teachers or administrators or bullied by peers.

### *Pre-Session Results*

Table 4.3 presents the initial results for Survey 2 (Appendix C). For Question 1, two participants (25%) chose 0, meaning they were not comfortable defining heteronormative. The other six responses were split across slightly comfortable and

moderately comfortable. When Question 2 asked participants to rate their comfort with explaining the concept, two (25%) selected 0, while six (75%) selected 1, showing slight comfort. Question 3 focused on identifying examples of heteronormativity in society. Two participants (25%) were uncomfortable doing so, while four participants (50%) chose 1, identifying as slightly comfortable, and two participants (25%) expressed moderate comfort. Finally, Question 4 asked participants about their comfort with identifying examples of heteronormativity at Lenape. Two participants (25%) selected a 0, suggesting they were not comfortable at all identifying heteronormative practices within our school, and six participants (75%) selected 1, indicating only slight comfort.

Table 4.3 *Pre-Session Frequency Table for Survey 2*

Question	Not	Slightly	Moderately	Highly
1. How comfortable are you with defining the term heteronormative?	2	3	3	
2. How comfortable are you with explaining the concept of heteronormativity?	2	6		
3. How comfortable are you with identifying examples of heteronormativity in our society?	2	4	2	
4. How comfortable are you with identifying examples of heteronormativity in our school?	2	6		

The pre-session data for Survey 2 confirmed my assumption about participants' prior knowledge of heteronormativity. Only three felt moderately comfortable defining it, but that comfort receded when asked about explaining the concept or identifying examples. Therefore, I constructed the first part of Session 2 in a way that would clearly define the term heteronormative and provide examples for discussion. Once I felt the participants were comfortable with the concept, I could shift to helping them identify examples in society and at school. Two participants felt moderately comfortable with

identifying examples within society, but most felt only slightly comfortable identifying examples at Lenape, indicating how ingrained the school's heteronormative culture was. In response, I researched examples of heteronormative beliefs in society, focusing on gendered products like baby clothing and media. I felt that analyzing and discussing such examples would help the participants recognize similar examples in our school.

### ***Session 2: Heteronormativity***

I began Session 2 by defining heteronormativity as society's conventional expectations for gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. Then, I displayed the pre-session results and asked the participants to speculate on their general lack of comfort with identifying examples. Beth stated, "We've been conditioned in our society to just accept these norms without questioning them." The rest of the participants agreed that because heteronormativity is so dominant in society, whether through movies, music, literature, and social media, dismissing it is easy.

Next, I shifted the conversation to examples of heteronormativity in society. Casey discussed the lack of gender-neutral clothing for infants and toddlers and how the "social construct of gender is thrown upon children at such a young age," adding, "My son is almost 1, and the only clothes I can buy are blue, gray, and black and have teddy bears, trucks, or dinosaurs on them." Casey's statement led to comments about phrases on toddlers' clothing. For example, Joe mentioned that in Target, he saw a onesie marketed for girls featuring "Daddy's Little Girl" and a onesie in blue featuring "Chicks Dig Me."

After about 25 minutes, I shifted the discussion to finding examples of Lenape's heteronormative culture. Deb volunteered to write the examples on the whiteboard and offered the first one: the new bathroom policy. To use the bathroom, students must take a



pass and place it next to the bathroom monitor in a spot labeled “boys” or “girls,” which Deb suggested can make transgender and gender nonconforming students anxious and stressed because they may struggle about where to place their pass. Jaime contributed, “Not to mention there is not a gender-neutral bathroom for students either. It perpetuates the heteronormative belief that all the students at Lenape are cisgender.”

Jumping off Jaime’s comment, Beth mentioned Lenape’s graduation robe tradition, using the school colors: boys wear gray and girls wear red. Beth stated, “Again, Lenape is focusing on the concept that every student is cisgender and ignoring the transgender and gender-nonconforming students.” Riley added that the graduation forms require students’ legal names because a diploma is a legal document. I countered that a high school diploma is not a legal document, and Michele suggested,

Again, a statement like this on any type of form or being forced to wear a certain color depending on your gender identity is not only anxiety-inducing for the transgender and gender nonconforming students but also shows them that Lenape does not recognize or respect their gender identity.

As a facilitator, I was happy with Michele’s comment because she summarized a dangerous aspect of the heteronormative culture at Lenape—a culture that forgets about not only LGBTQ+ students but also transgender students by dismissing and disrespecting their gender identity. Her comment also solidified to me that the participants had become more knowledgeable about heteronormative practices in society and Lenape.

After all the participants agreed that these policies need to change, I asked, “Does the administrators at Lenape or the administrators’ actions do anything to promote a heteronormative culture?” After about 30 seconds, I hear a resounding “Yes.” Jaime, who

is also the Debate Club advisor, mentioned our principal's disbelief that the debate team was undefeated because "They are all girls." This attitude demonstrates a dangerous perspective on gender: that women are inherently less successful at debate than men.

As another example, Jackie mentioned how at our school's annual Fall pep rally, intended to celebrate all Fall sports teams, "The football team is the only one that is truly celebrated." Joe added,

For the last few years, our girls' track team has broken state and school records, yet they are barely mentioned at the pep rally, however, the football team gets to run out on the floor, gets to be introduced individually, gets to jump around yelling and chest-bumping each other, and the principal joins in on it.

Jackie agreed and mentioned that this display of "toxic masculinity" only promotes the idea that men need to act a certain way to be accepted, which "shows the women, transgender, and gender nonconforming students that unless you play a masculine sport like football, you will not be accepted here."

The final part of Session 2 focused on combating heteronormativity. One solution I suggested was adding pronouns to email signatures. The simple action conveys allyship and respect for students, especially transgender and gender nonconforming students. I then showed the participants how to edit their signatures, and all eight followed my lead.

Next, I discussed the idea of not making assumptions about students. Rather than assuming all students are cisgender and straight, teachers should consider that any student in any class could be LGBTQ+. To make such students comfortable, I recommended displaying Safe Space or LGBTQ+ Ally stickers, along with LGBTQ+ posters or literature. As another means of creating an open, safe, and affirming space for LGBTQ+

students, I encouraged using gender-neutral terminology when discussing their significant others, such as substituting “partner” for “husband” or “wife.”

Session 2 was extremely powerful and rewarding, as I was able to watch my participants expand their knowledge and understanding of heteronormative behaviors and beliefs not only within society but also at Lenape. Once they could analyze the heteronormative aspects of the examples I provided, I felt confident that they could apply this skill to finding additional examples at school. After the lengthy discussion of our school’s heteronormative culture and environment, I felt fairly confident that the post-session survey results would increase compared to the pre-session results.

### ***Post-Session Results***

Comparing the post-session results for Survey 2 to the initial results revealed an overall increase in participants’ comfort not only with defining heteronormativity but also explaining it and identifying it within society and at Lenape. For example, Figure 4.6 shows that only one participant (12.5%) selected 2 and seven (87.5%) selected 3 when asked about their comfort with defining the term. Prior to Session 2, two participants selected a 0, three participants selected a 1, and three participants selected a 2.

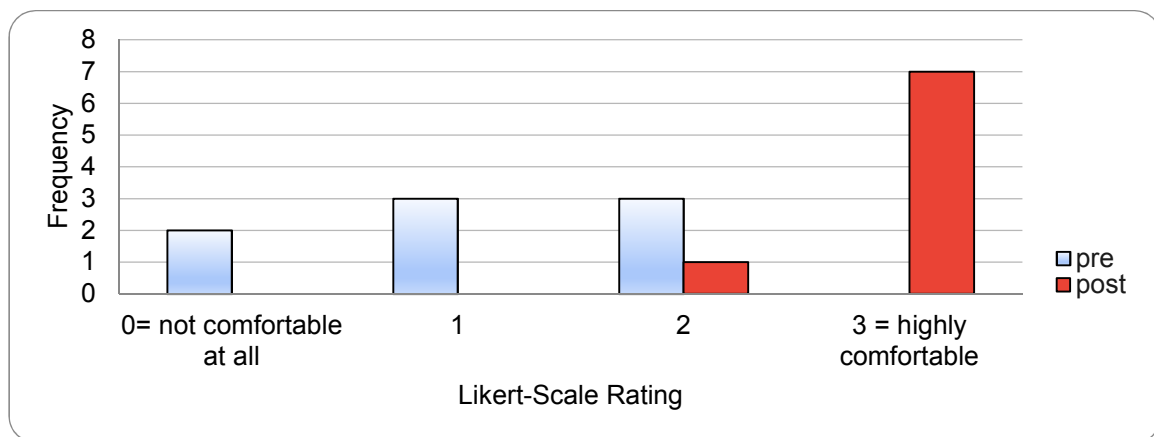


Figure 4.6 *Comparison of Survey 2 Results for Question 1*

Question 2 asked whether participants felt comfortable explaining the concept of heteronormativity. Two participants (25%) selected 2, while six participants (75%) selected 3. Figure 4.7 shows this rise in comfort, which I attributed to the extensive group discussion about heteronormativity and the definitions I provided during Session 2.

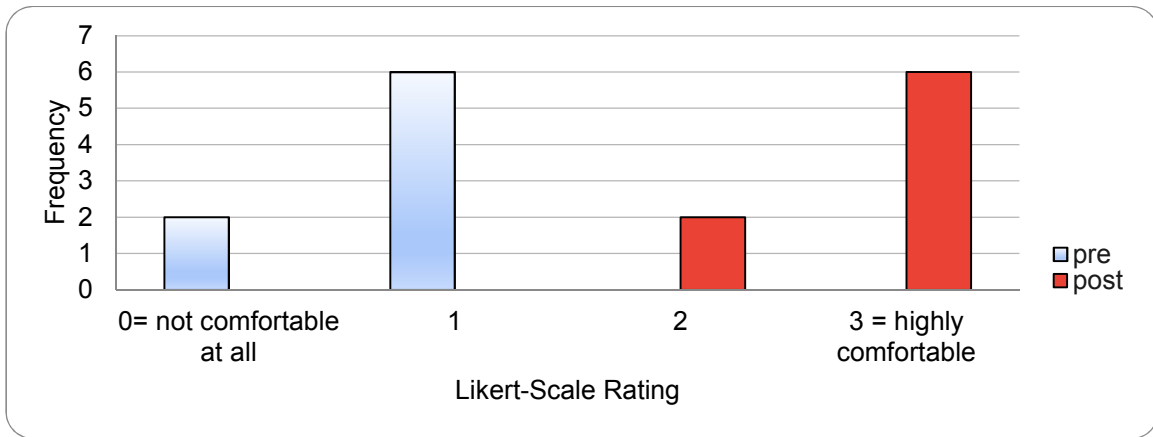


Figure 4.7 *Comparison of Survey 2 Results for Question 2*

Question 3 also revealed an increase (Figure 4.8). When asked about their comfort with identifying examples of heteronormativity in society before Session 2, none of the participants indicated a high level of comfort. After the session, seven participants (87.5%) selected 3, and only one participant (12.5%) indicated a lower level of comfort.

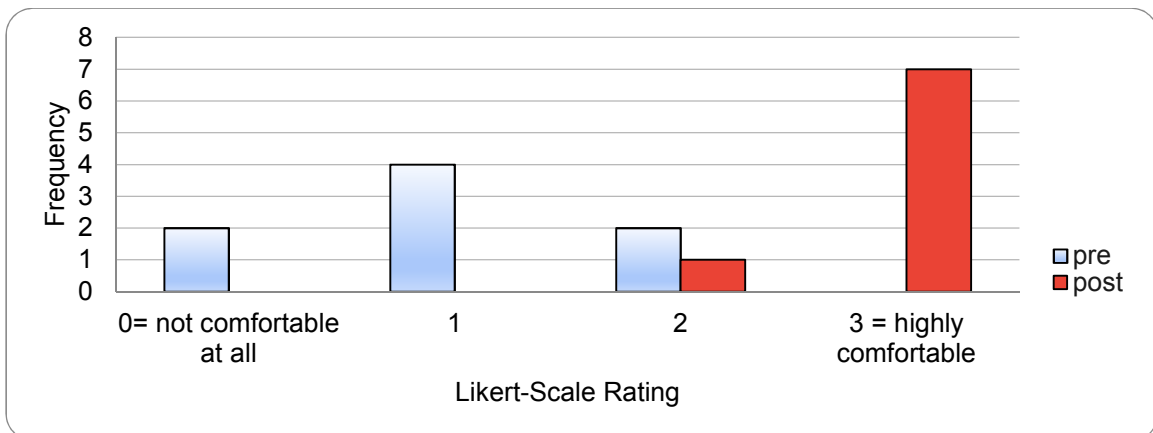


Figure 4.8 *Comparison of Survey 2 Results for Question 3*

I saw a similar increase for Question 4, regarding participants' comfort with identifying examples of heteronormativity at Lenape High School (Figure 4.9). One participant (12.5%) selected 2 and seven participants (87.5%) selected 3. Prior to Session 2, two participants selected 0 and six participants selected a 1.

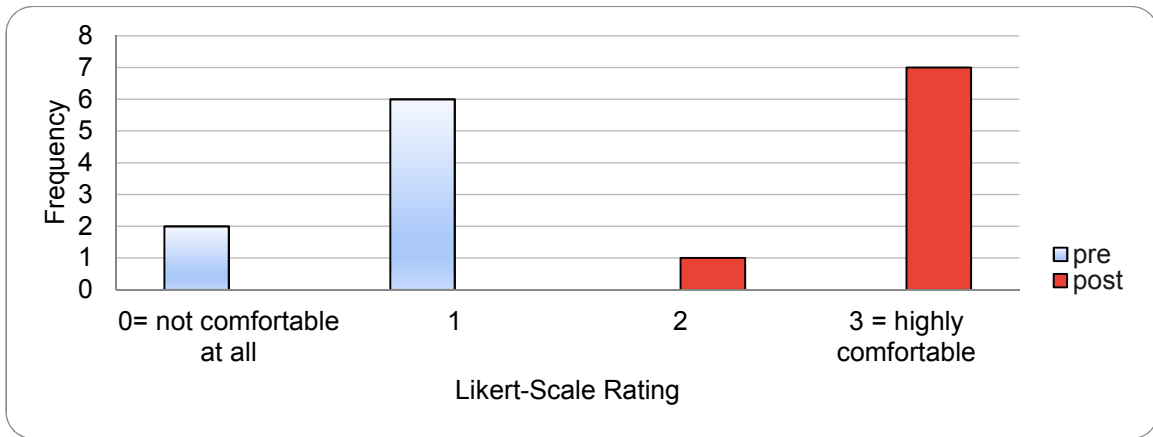


Figure 4.9 *Comparison of Survey 2 Results for Question 4*

Comparing the results for Questions 3 and 4 was especially encouraging. Participants' increased comfort with identifying heteronormativity in society and at school suggested the examples I provided and the discussion I facilitated during Session 2 were powerful and informative. After analyzing the results for Sessions 1 and 2, I felt confident that participants had gained a good working knowledge of LGBTQ+ and gender identity terminology and heteronormative practices and beliefs. Therefore, I felt comfortable moving to the next phase of my study.

### Phase 3

In Phase 3, I hoped to focus on queer theory. I envisioned a session on defining queer theory, introducing the basic concepts, and discussing how to analyze literature through a queer lens. To develop participants' knowledge of queer theory, I first needed an understanding of their comfort.

### ***Pre-Session Results***

Table 4.4 presents the initial results for Survey 3 (Appendix D). For Question 1, four participants (50%) indicated a total lack of comfort with defining queer literary theory, three (37.5%) indicated slight comfort, and one (12.5%) reported moderate comfort. When asked about explaining the main concepts of queer theory, five participants (62.5%) responded to Question 2 with 0, with the other three (37.5%) selecting 1. The final survey question asked how comfortable my colleagues were with analyzing literature through a queer perspective. One participant (12.5%) selected 0, six (75%) selected 1, and one (12.5%) selected 2. In other words, only two participants were moderately comfortable applying queer theory, and all participants felt at least somewhat uncomfortable with the prospect of explaining it.

Table 4.4 *Pre-Session Frequency Table for Survey 3*

Question	Not	Slightly	Moderately	Highly
1. How comfortable are you with defining queer literary theory?	4	3	1	
2. How comfortable are you with explaining the main concepts of queer theory?	5	3		
3. How comfortable are you with analyzing works of literature through a queer perspective?	1	6	1	

Based on this pre-session data, I planned to begin Session 3 by defining queer theory and discussing the goals of queer theory. Because my participants had demonstrated a clear grasp of heteronormativity in Phase 2, I intended to connect that concept with the goals of queer theory to make my participants more comfortable with the overall concept of queer theory. I also planned to emphasize the value of queer theory in ELA by discussing how analyzing literature through a queer perspective can help

LGBTQ+ students feel accepted and validated while offering straight and cisgender students a way to understand the struggles of the LGBTQ+ community. The pre-session results for Question 3 confirmed my assumption that my colleagues did not feel comfortable adopting a queer perspective. Because only two participants reported feeling moderately comfortable with the prospect of applying queer theory, I located two poems to help the group learn and practice. I decided to display one on my document camera so I could model queer analysis and invite the participants to analyze the other in hope that they would gain a better understanding.

### ***Session 3: Queer Theory***

I began Session 3 by displaying the initial survey results on a Google Slides presentation and asking my colleagues' thoughts about the group's lack of comfort with identifying, explaining, and applying queer theory. Deb and Joe shared that their teacher preparation classes never discussed queer theory. Further confirming the assumption, I expressed in Chapter 1, Jaime stated, "It is not an intentional disregard for teaching works through a queer perspective; it's just we haven't been trained in it." Jackie agreed, "We have not even had any in-service or professional development sessions even discussing diversity and inclusion, let alone analyzing works in queer theory." Concurring, Michele offered, "I would love to look at literature through a queer perspective, but I just don't feel comfortable doing so without the proper training and education." All eight teachers admitted they were not very knowledgeable about queer theory but welcomed professional development to help them feel more comfortable.

I shifted the discussion to defining queer theory and looking at some of its basic characteristics. I chose to focus solely on concepts that are easy to understand and apply.

First, I explained that queer theory enables people to actively critique heteronormativity and deconstruct traditional assumptions that all identities are heterosexual and cisgender. Turning to the example of Jo in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, I noted how she does not fit the social construct of what a 19th-century woman should be. Through a queer perspective, Jo is strong, willful, and temperamental—characteristics that go against the submissive, domestic view of women in the 1800s. Further explaining how queer theory can disrupt traditional thoughts about gender and sexual identities, I noted how one can look at Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and analyze the possible homosexual relationship between Hamlet and Horatio or focus on the contrast between Shakespeare's "Dark Lady" sonnets and those written for the "Fair Youth," a man.

Then, I used my document camera to model how to analyze Bidart's (2012) poem "Queer" through a queer perspective. I highlighted lines such as "*Lie to yourself about this and you will / forever lie about everything*" (Bidart, 2012, 1–2) to underscore the internal conflict and fear associated with deciding whether to come out. Lying to oneself by conforming to societal standards and pressure and never accepting one's authentic self means never being free and living a lie.

Finally, I gave participants 10–15 minutes to analyze Joy Ladin's (2017) poem, "Survival Guide" through a queer perspective, providing copies so they could write notes in the margin. Once my colleagues had analyzed the poem individually, we discussed it as a group. Jackie, Jaime, and Casey focused on the line "it helps to be young / when you're coming to life" (Ladin, 2017, 2–3), associating "coming to life" with the constant struggle of being one's authentic self and figuring out one's identity.



Thinking in terms of queer theory also prompted participants to focus on “So break out a box of Crayolas // and draw your family / looking uncomfortably away / from the you you’ve exchanged // for the mannequin / they named” (Ladin, 2017, 6–11). Beth, Riley, and Michele interpreted the Crayola box as a symbol of childhood and discovering one’s own sexual orientation and gender identity. To Joe, it symbolized the LGBTQ+ community and its diversity. For Casey, the “mannequin they named” (Ladin, 2017, 10–11) symbolized coming into one’s own authentic self, with the “mannequin” being the version of the speaker their parents and society created—in Casey’s words, “A fake version of being straight and cisgender to appease the heteronormative beliefs in society.”

The participants also discussed Lines 12–15, “but you’re so busy being afraid // to love or not / you’re missing the fun of clothing yourself / in the embarrassment of life” (Ladin, 2017). As Deb argued, the first part

expresses the fear of coming out and potentially losing friends and family because of it. The lines can also signify being afraid to come to terms with your own sexual orientation or gender identity, especially in a society that praises heteronormative values and beliefs.

Beth agreed with Deb’s interpretation, adding that the lines can also “represent the fear of not loving your authentic self.”

In the final stanzas, the speaker states, “Turn yourself into // the real you / you can only discover / by being other. // Voila! You’re free” (Ladin, 2017, 21–27). These lines sparked much discussion among my participants. Casey viewed the speaker as someone who is gay or transgender yet pretending to be straight or cisgender to “fit into societal norms and expectations, but by doing [the alternative], you can discover ‘the real you’ or

your authentic self.” Michele agreed and added that the poem evokes the freedom of finally accepting one’s sexual orientation or gender identity: “You’re free to be your true self and to accept that you are allowed to be who you are regardless of societal expectations.” I also agreed and ended the session by suggesting the poem is ideal for classroom use when teaching from a queer perspective. LGBTQ+ students as well as straight and cisgender students can relate to the struggles of identity, something all teenagers face. The quest to find one’s authentic self is part of the human experience.

### ***Post-Session Results***

As Figure 4.10 illustrates, when I readministered Survey 3, I observed an increase in participants’ comfort. For Question 1, regarding respondents’ comfort with defining queer theory, three (37.5%) selected 2, showing moderate comfort, and five (62.5%) selected 3, demonstrating a high level of comfort. In contrast, prior to Session 3, four participants selected 0, three participants selected 1, and only one participant selected 2. In other words, Session 3 improved their ability to define queer theory.

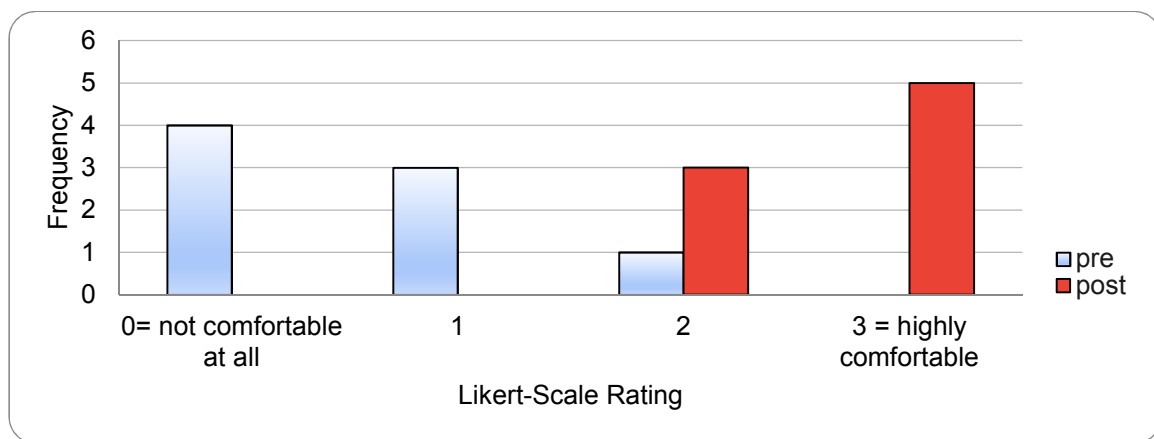


Figure 4.10 *Comparison of Survey 3 Results for Question 1*

The second question asked participants to rate their comfort with explaining the main concepts of queer theory. Again, I detected an increase (Figure 4.11). Whereas on

the pre-session survey, five participants selected 0 and three participants selected 1, on the post-session survey, two participants (25%) indicated moderate comfort and five participants (75%), by selecting 3, demonstrated a high level of comfort.

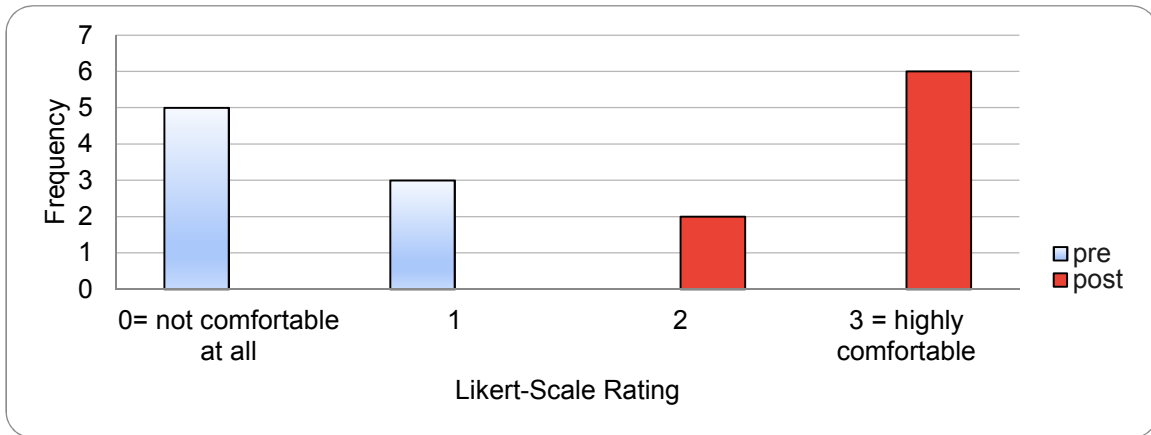


Figure 4.11 *Comparison of Survey 3 Results for Question 2*

Finally, the third question asked participants to rate their comfort with analyzing literature through a queer perspective. Before Session 3, one participant selected a 0, six participants selected a 1, and one participant chose a 2. After the session, I saw an increase (Figure 4.12). Three participants (37.5%) selected 2, showing their moderate comfort, and five participants (62.5%) selected 3, demonstrating a high level of comfort.

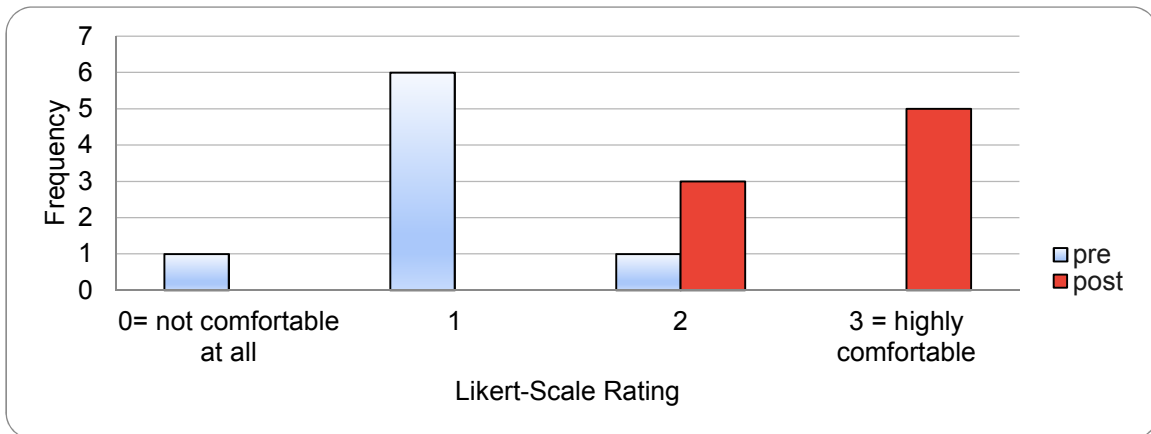


Figure 4.12 *Comparison of Survey 3 Results for Question 3*

I attributed the overall increase in participants' comfort to my design for Session 3. Discussing queer theory as a group helped participants see its potential in the classroom to help LGBTQ+ students feel seen, help straight and cisgender students find common ground with their LGBTQ+ peers, and help all students empathize with the struggles and injustices facing the LGBTQ+ community. I also believe my modeling how to analyze a work of literature through a queer perspective played a role in increasing participants' comfort, as did having the opportunity to practice for themselves.

#### **Phase 4**

During Phase 4, I hoped to focus on LGBTQ+ authors in our curriculum. I wanted participants to feel comfortable not only with introducing the authors' sexual orientation or gender identity when teaching biographical information but also with teaching their work through a queer perspective. Building from Phase 3, I expected the session to make participants even more comfortable with applying queer theory in their classrooms.

#### ***Pre-Session Results***

Participants completed Survey 4 (Appendix E), which featured three open-ended questions, to help me prepare for Session 4. The only LGBTQ+ authors in the curriculum that all eight participants could identify were Walt Whitman and William Shakespeare. I believe the participants were familiar with the sexual orientation of these authors because some of the participants and I have had discussions regarding how Whitman had many male lovers, including Peter Doyle, and Shakespeare was known for writing sonnets to a young man, as I mentioned during the previous session.

Question 1 also invited participants who could not identify many LGBTQ+ authors in the ELA curriculum to explain why. Among these responses, six participants

noted LGBTQ+ status not being mentioned in our curriculum. One stated, “There aren’t any authors in the curriculum that I could name but I think that’s because it is not emphasized or mentioned in our curriculum.” Another suggested, “The publisher may not wish to publicize this information for fear of being banned, especially in the current environment around the country.” In other words, ELA teachers may lack knowledge about LGBTQ+ authors simply because biographical information omits their sexual orientation or gender identity—evidence of the null curriculum at work (Eisner, 1985).

The second question focused on participants’ comfort with discussing an author’s sexual orientation or gender identity in class. When analyzing the responses, I detected a theme of hesitation. Participants expressed a desire to mention authors’ gender identity or sexual orientation to promote inclusion and representation, yet they were apprehensive that students would not support their decisions. One stated,

I want to believe that I feel like I can teach LGBTQ+ authors in the classroom, however, based on the negative comments in the hallways from students about items or other students being ‘so gay’, I don’t know if they have the maturity or the open-mindedness to allow me to discuss LGBTQ+ authors without there being some resistance.

Other participants expressed similar fear of potential backlash from administrators who may not be supportive of LGBTQ+ individuals. One explicitly said, “I do not feel supported by our administration in regards to these topics.”

Seeing a clear need for professional development that addresses how to handle criticism of including LGBTQ+ authors in the curriculum, I designed Session 4. First, I researched the authors in our ELA curriculum who are members of the LGBTQ+

community and constructed brief biographical summaries with suggestions for incorporating such information in ELA discussions. To build on the results of Phase 3, when participants gained knowledge about and comfort with teaching from a queer perspective, I included examples of literature from the curriculum by LGBTQ+ authors and suggestions for analyzing them through a queer perspective. Finally, I sought to address participants' hesitation to teach LGBTQ+ literature by planning a discussion on how to handle resistant students, parents, and administrators.

#### ***Session 4: Incorporating LGBTQ+ Authors***

I began Session 4 with a Google Slides presentation, where I shared that the pre-session survey responses only cited Shakespeare and Walt Whitman as examples of LGBTQ+ authors. Beth mentioned Emily Dickinson and Langston Hughes but qualified, "I'm not positive on if these two are LGBTQ+; I just remember my professor vaguely mentioning it in one of my undergraduate classes." I confirmed that Hughes and Dickinson were members of the LGBTQ+ community and that we would discuss some of their works. I listed other LGBTQ+ authors from our ELA curriculum, such as Allen Ginsberg and Alice Walker, and reminded the group about Frank Bidart and Joy Ladin, the poets we discussed and analyzed from a queer perspective in Session 3. I also mentioned Benjamin Alire Sáenz, whose work I anticipated incorporating in Session 5.

When I asked my colleagues about their lack of familiarity with the sexual orientation of the authors other than Shakespeare and Whitman, Casey responded that she was not familiar with any authors who spoke about their sexual orientation or gender identity in any scholarly articles or literary criticism she has read, speculating, "This information is not often promoted or publicized unless it is related to the content of the

work.” Jackie agreed and added, “In the time period that many of these authors lived, it was not only taboo but dangerous to be so open about your sexual orientation.”

Jaime offered a different perspective by stating that she suspects many authors in our ELA curriculum could be part of the LGBTQ+ community while admitting, “There were not many I could name because it is not emphasized or mentioned at all in our curriculum.” Jaime’s comment led to a discussion of the importance of simply mentioning the sexual orientation of LGBTQ+ authors when introducing their biographical information to students. As Riley said, “LGBTQ+ students need to be seen, and by discussing LGBTQ+ authors in our curriculum, it allows the LGBTQ+ students to feel valid.” In fact, discussing the sexual orientation or gender identity of LGBTQ+ authors can benefit all students (Page, 2017a).

To focus on how to discuss authors’ sexual orientation, I showed Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 18: Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day?” and provided some talking points for discussing Shakespeare’s bisexuality by explaining how some of his sonnets address a man and in other sonnets, the gender identity of the lover is unknown. Joe had “never noticed that some of Shakespeare’s sonnets we study freshmen year, like ‘Sonnet 18’ does not describe the gender identity of [the speaker’s] lover,” adding, “I just always assumed it was a girl, but I suppose that is because of the heteronormative culture of education and never really talking much about Shakespeare being bisexual.” The group speculated that not mentioning the gender identity of the sonnets’ subjects allowed Shakespeare to express his love without being attacked or shamed for it.

After this discussion, I explained how to incorporate queer theory into a lesson on the sonnet, which is part of the Grade 9 curriculum. I recommended starting with analysis

of the sonnet as an indication of love between a man and a woman so students can understand poetic devices and themes. Riley, who teaches Grade 9, liked this suggestion because with freshmen you have to make sure they understand the sonnet and poetic devices first before thoroughly analyzing it. So, making sure they understand the concepts and themes first makes it easier for them to then look at ‘Sonnet 18’ for a queer perspective.

Indeed, after students grasp the poem from a heteronormative perspective, teachers can refer to the poet’s biography and guide students through a queer analysis of the work.

Next, we discussed Langston Hughes, who was also bisexual. I discussed how Hughes struggled with his sexual orientation and tried to hide it although it is evident in his works, including two poems in the sophomore curriculum, “Mother to Son” and “I, Too.” Regarding the first poem, Deb liked

the idea of connecting certain lines of the poem to the author’s biography because not only can you draw that personal connection between the author’s life and the poem, it also allows students to understand the struggles those in the LGBTQ+ community face between being their authentic self and hiding their identity to be socially accepted.

Jaime echoed Deb and added that students could research anti-LGBTQ+ laws throughout the country and “discuss how the poem connects to surviving homophobia or just being LGBTQ+ in America.” Both comments made me realize the power of my intervention in terms of the potential for making LGBTQ+ students feel seen and supported.

Moving to “I, Too,” I recommended a similar approach but also noted the potential to connect the themes to any marginalized group, facilitating more of a



windows-and-mirrors analysis (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015). Michele agreed and shared that she felt “more comfortable teaching both of these poems because it allows each student to see themselves reflected in the analysis but also offers the ability to see the struggles of marginalized groups as well.” Casey did not disagree but voiced concern about backlash from parents, administrators, and even students when analyzing a poem from a queer perspective, alluding to a theme I had detected on the pre-session surveys.

From there, the discussion shifted away from the LGBTQ+ authors and toward addressing such backlash. Indeed, the other teachers also felt hesitant to teach from a queer perspective simply because, as Jackie explained, they “are not sure how to handle a student, administrator, or parent who refuses to analyze the work.” Casey shared one such incident involving the forms she asks students to complete at the beginning of the year:

I ask students to identify their pronouns. A kid this year responded with ‘just my name, this is stupid.’ In another space in the form, he wrote, ‘teachers should just teach and not promote any ideologies.’ I know I can’t let one or two kids dictate things, and I know if I never address mindsets like this with kids, then those who are ignorant won’t change. But I also don’t feel like I will be supported, which then means I’ll be told I have to show the ‘opposite’ side of things, and quite frankly, I just don’t even know what that means.

Casey’s story prompted other participants to reflect on similar incidents. Riley mentioned parents who have gone to administrators and complained about their students’ ELA teachers trying to “indoctrinate their children with liberal beliefs.” I, myself, have had parents complain about my teaching through a queer perspective. When I asked the participants what administrators told them to do, Jaime said her supervisor told her, “You

have to show all sides of the issue, or don't discuss it at all." My supervisor made a similar comment to me. I understand my colleagues' hesitation to teach through a queer perspective especially if they will be reprimanded, which is why I planned to conclude Session 4 by focusing on how to address backlash.

I started with the need to identify our own biases, inviting participants to think about specific questions such as "How would you feel if someone close to you came out to you?" and "Can you think of any historical figures who are LGBTQ+?" Rather than asking participants to share their answers aloud, I wanted them to self-reflect and recognize their potential biases. Doing so could heighten their awareness of how they may treat or interact with LGBTQ+ students consciously and subconsciously.

To discuss how to address backlash, I presented a slide with specific examples of what to say if an administrator shares a parent or student complaint about teaching from a queer perspective. I reiterated New Jersey's LGBT and Disabilities Law, which requires instruction on the political, economic, and social contributions of persons with disabilities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, in an appropriate place in the curriculum of middle school and high school students as part of the district's implementation of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards [and] policies and procedures in place pertaining to the selection of instructional materials to implement the requirements. (Bill A1335, 2018)

Therefore, according to this law, incorporating LGBTQ+ authors or themes in our ELA curriculum is mandatory. Also, I encouraged participants to remind administrators they have offered no training or professional development to address these issues properly.

As for addressing students who may be reluctant to analyze literature from a queer perspective or say anti-LGBTQ+ comments, I recommended acknowledging that everyone deserves to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and shutting down any anti-LGBTQ+ comments. When such behavior persists, I advised escorting the student out of class before addressing the rest of class to emphasize a no-tolerance policy toward ignorant comments. Once a teacher has stopped such behavior, the incident can become a teachable moment to affirm LGBTQ+ identity. I also reminded participants that at Lenape, we must complete a discipline referral and follow up on it, along with reading Lenape's Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying Policy to ensure the student receives a just punishment. Participants discussed these suggestions and reported feeling more at ease in terms of knowing what to do with a parent, administrator, or student who refuses to allow them to teach from a queer perspective.

### ***Post-Session Results***

After Session 4, I readministered Survey 4 to assess whether I had eased participants' fears about teaching through a queer perspective and whether they felt more comfortable doing so. All eight participants indicated feeling more prepared to effectively discuss authors' sexual orientation in class and analyze literature through a queer perspective. One stated, "Yes, I do feel comfortable. I think discussing this (with relevance) can help students in the class feel more represented and comfortable knowing that there are authors like them." Another explained,

If the author openly and publicly identified as LGBTQ+, then I would be very comfortable in discussing this in the classroom. It is not a new reality in our world and if it applies to themes within the reading, absolutely!

Both comments met my expectations for the post-session survey, proving that my participants felt more comfortable with the idea of teaching LGBTQ+ authors, themes, and issues. The responses also validated my assumption that my colleagues just needed targeted professional development to expand their knowledge and increase their comfort.

The final open-ended question focused on whether any topics from Session 4 were unclear. One participant wanted more examples of how to address backlash, feeling “unclear how supportive our administrators would be if we were to discuss these issues with our students.” I agreed and planned to create more talking points for responding to administrators who may not support teaching about LGBTQ+ authors or themes.

Overall, Session 4 was a success. Acknowledging they had learned, one participant stated, “Your information made the idea of queer theory and heteronormativity very clear. I now understand how queer theory is a lens similar to gender theory and other analysis tools for literature. It is all about perspective.” The participant added, “I can definitely still use practice analyzing the works - but the poems and works we analyzed in the sessions did help me refine some analysis skills. I have a solid foundation to approach this literature.” I also found Session 4 rewarding, as I witnessed participants’ increasing comfort with applying queer theory and incorporating LGBTQ+ authors and literature in their classrooms. Some remained hesitant to address issues with administrators or parents, yet overall, they were more willing to be proactive in addressing anti-LGBTQ+ comments or administrative concerns about their instruction.

## **Phase 5**

The final phase of my intervention centered on Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, a required text in the Grade 9

ELA curriculum. A coming-of-age novel, it focuses on two gay Mexican boys, Aristotle “Ari” Mendoza and Dante Quintana. Dante is confident in his sexual orientation and his true self, while Ari is still struggling with his sexual orientation and his true self.

Throughout the novel, Ari and Dante navigate their friendship, racial and ethnic identities, sexual orientation, and family dynamics. I wanted to provide specific lessons the participants could use when teaching this novel. Although Casey and Michele did not teach Grade 9 at the time of the study, they participated in the session, knowing their teaching load can change from year to year.

Because I already had ample survey data from the prior phases, I did not administer a pre-session survey for Phase 5. Instead, I prepared sample LGBTQ+ lessons the ELA teachers could use to supplement their literary analysis of selected poems and Alire Sáenz’s novel. For example, discussions from Session 4, focusing on Hughes and Shakespeare, allowed me to design sample lessons focusing on some of their poetry. I also designed lessons for *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. I wanted to show the impact that including LGBTQ+ authors, literature, and themes can have inside the classroom and toward combating a heteronormative culture.

### ***Session 5: Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe Lesson Plans***

I began Session 5 with Jimenez-Lindmeier’s (2017) article, “As a Gay Man, the 80s Crippled My Identity,” which I recommended sharing with students before starting the novel. Jimenez-Lindmeier describes the struggles of being gay in the 1980s and his personal fight when figuring out his own sexual orientation. Riley, who taught *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* last year for the first time, agreed the article could be “incredibly helpful for [her] students in order to become familiar with the

time period of the 80s but also to understand the struggles of the LGBTQ+ community as they search for their true identity.” Joe echoed Riley’s comment about the historical context, a time when society

was much less accepting of the LGBTQ+ community than now, not that everyone is accepting of the LGBTQ+ community today, but with the LGBTQ+ being blamed for the AIDS epidemic and no positive LGBTQ+ representation, this article can help students see the struggles not only this author faced but also the entire community.

Building on these responses, my colleagues and I discussed how to incorporate the article and concluded that Grade 9 students could read it and take marginal notes on how the author felt trapped, examples of negative stereotypes of being gay, and ideas of toxic masculinity. Then, the ninth-grade teachers could facilitate class discussion about the examples students found, which would make LGBTQ+ students feel valid in their struggles while fostering sympathy in their straight and cisgender peers due to understanding the discrimination and unjust actions against the community.

The participants also offered the idea of consistently referring to the article when studying the character of Ari, whose struggles resemble those of Jimenez-Lindmeier (2017). They suggested students could identify textual evidence of Ari’s struggle with his sexual orientation, self-identity, and identity within his family and society and draw comparisons to the article. The group felt making such comparisons would enable students to thoroughly analyze the text as well as understand and acknowledge the struggles of the LGBTQ+ community.

Because Ari and Dante also face issues related to masculinity, femininity, and toxic masculinity (Alire Sáenz, 2012), I shifted our discussion to the social construct of gender—a difficult concept for ninth graders. I offered two different activity examples for helping students understand. First, I showed a picture of a baby wearing a white shirt and bright pink pants and asked the group to guess what gender their students would think the baby was. Michele said, “My students would argue that the baby is a girl because of the hot pink pants.” Riley, Joe, and Beth, gave similar responses, and Deb suggested “Students would automatically be drawn to thinking the baby was a girl because in society, pink is usually associated with girls.” Jaime agreed and referred back to our Session 2 discussion on heteronormativity and how baby clothes are often gendered. I revealed that the image was a picture of my son and shared that when I use it as an example in class, my students do, indeed, assume the baby is a girl because of the pants.

I then discussed how this simple picture can lead into a discussion about the social construct of gender. First, teachers can define the social construct of gender by stating that it is attitudes and ideas that society deems socially appropriate for boys and girls. Then, teachers can ask students to list examples of masculinity and femininity. Students may describe masculinity as being strong, aggressive, or unemotional, while descriptions of femininity usually mean being weak, soft-spoken, and emotional. From there, teachers can discuss how people learn what is expected of their gender through parents or guardians, school, religion, and media and ask students to articulate and explain their perspectives on these ideals. Jackie seemed appreciative, noting, “This is a simple activity that can help my freshmen understand a difficult concept.”

I then discussed a fun activity I have done with my students relating to the social construct of gender. The teacher can compile a slide show of needlessly gendered products, such as Dove's "For Men" shampoo and conditioner, and have students explain why the products do not need to be gendered. From there, students can find their own needlessly gendered products and present them to the class while explaining how ridiculous the marketing practice is. Deb said this activity "can really help the students not only understand the social construct of gender, but also start to understand the heteronormative culture of Lenape since everything here is gendered."

Moving to the concept of toxic masculinity, I listed examples such as physical aggression, discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, hyper independence, and anti-feminist beliefs and behavior. I explained the importance of discussing toxic masculinity with students because it is a prevalent theme in the book. For introducing the topic to their students, I gave them White's (2021) article that provides examples of toxic masculinity as well as ways to address it. Casey found it helpful because "It simplifies a complex term so students can not only understand it but maybe even apply it to their own behavior or the behavior and speech of others at Lenape." Riley suggested the article could also be useful when analyzing characters' actions in *Romeo and Juliet*, helping students identify Tybalt's toxic masculinity. I noted the article ideally could challenge students' heteronormative and toxic masculine thinking.

I also showed Porter's (2010) TED Talk, *A Call to Men*, which focuses on the dangers of toxic masculinity. I recommended sharing it with students, inviting them to write words or phrases they found powerful in connection to the dangers of toxic masculinity, and facilitating a whole-class discussion. I reiterated that all the activities we



discussed demonstrated how to take a difficult concept and make it easy to understand. When students grasp concepts like toxic masculinity and the social construct of gender, as well as heteronormativity, they can find evidence from *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Alire Sáenz, 2012) and gain a deeper understanding of the novel.

### ***Post-Session Results***

After Session 5, the final session, I asked my participants to complete Survey 5 (Appendix F). In line with the purpose of my study, I wanted to gauge their overall comfort and knowledge in response to my intervention. I also hoped to determine whether participants needed additional clarity about any of the topics we discussed.

The responses to Question 1 overwhelmingly indicated the sessions were clear and informative. One person wrote, “All of the professional development sessions were clearly presented. I really got a lot from the examples of specific activities (and some videos/articles/other materials) to use with students to address the social construct of gender, toxic masculinity, etc.” Another shared, “All topics were discussed in a way that helped me to understand them completely.” This comment suggested I succeeded in my goal for the participants to feel more comfortable with and knowledgeable about LGBTQ+ issues and challenging heteronormativity.

Question 2 focused on how participants felt about teaching LGBTQ+ terminology, authors, or literature, as well as queer theory after the professional development sessions. Again, most responses conveyed an increase in comfort and knowledge. One participant noted,

I am much more comfortable speaking about and teaching LGBTQ+ terminology, authors, literature and queer theory. I know I still need hands-on practice with analyzing works through the lens of queer theory but I feel like I know how to begin to approach it. I feel extremely comfortable discussing the social construct of gender, toxic masculinity and heteronormativity.

Other participants had similar responses, such as, “I feel more comfortable teaching these different components, and I feel that they’re important to address. We have a lot of students who are part of the LGBTQ+ community, so it’s important for all students to feel represented.” Overall, the responses suggested an increase in participants’ confidence related to teaching these concepts.

The final question asked participants to identify any other LGBTQ+ topics or teaching strategies they would like to address in future sessions. When analyzing the responses, I detected a clear theme: “How we can approach this topic more with administrators? It’s hard to include more diverse authors and topics when we know we might be told to present the ‘alternative or opposing view.’” In addition to navigating administrative concerns, participants also expressed a desire for more resources in the curriculum for focusing on LGBTQ+ authors, themes, and literature. One participant went further to recommend “a schoolwide initiative for LGBTQ+ inclusion.”

I believe Session 5 was my best, as the participants were able to connect previous lessons on LGBTQ+ terminology and heteronormativity throughout the discussion about the sample lessons. For example, when Riley extended our conversation about Alire Sáenz’s novel to another text, I felt confident my participants not only understood concepts like heteronormativity and the social construct of gender but felt more

comfortable teaching those concepts to their students. The shift I witnessed gave me hope for more inclusive classrooms of the sort that can combat heteronormativity at Lenape.

At the same time, as the responses to Question 3 revealed, the participants remained concerned about administrators. At Lenape, administrators tend to be more conservative regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion, and the ELA district supervisor emphasizes the need to avoid any conflicts with students' guardians, so my colleagues were understandably worried about backlash. Even though they appreciated my suggested talking points, I took note of their need for more professional development to gain confidence to fight back against those opposing LGBTQ+ inclusion.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 4 displayed the pre-session and post-session data along with a discussion of each of the five professional development sessions, based on my field notes. This narrative illustrated the rise in participants' comfort and knowledge throughout the intervention period. Chapter 5 presents the major points of the sessions and the implications of the findings of the action research study.

## CHAPTER 5

### IMPLICATIONS

In Chapter 1, I introduced my problem of practice: my belief that the ELA curriculum at Lenape High School contributes to our heteronormative culture. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to confront this heteronormativity by encouraging ELA teachers to incorporate LGBTQ+ authors, literature, and themes and apply queer theory in their classrooms. As Chapter 4 illustrated, I facilitated five professional development sessions on LGBTQ+ terminology, heteronormativity, and queer theory, as well as how to apply such perspectives in an ELA classroom. Guided by my research questions, I sought to examine how implementing these targeted professional development sessions impacted eight ELA teachers' knowledge of and comfort with more inclusive instruction.

#### **Overview of the Research Design**

As Chapter 3 explained, I used convenience sampling to enlist eight of my ELA colleagues as participants for this qualitative study. In addition to attending five professional development sessions, they completed anonymous pre and post surveys featuring Likert-scale and open-ended questions aligned with the topics for each session. The Likert-scale surveys enabled participants to indicate their comfort level before and after experiencing targeted professional development. The open-ended questions related to Sessions 4 and 5 invited more extensive answers. Descriptive analysis of the Likert-scale data helped me determine the increase in participants' comfort and knowledge, and I used thematic coding to identify common phrases and ideas in the open-ended

responses. Supplementing the participant-generated data, the field notes and reflections in my researcher journal supplied specific quotes, phrases, and that further enhanced my analysis of the group's comfort and knowledge.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The data showed an overall increase in participants' comfort with and knowledge of LGBTQ+ authors, themes, and literature, as well as queer theory. This evidence suggests the targeted professional development I designed successfully encouraged them to incorporate these topics in their classrooms. If my participants apply what they learned in the sessions, we can combat the dangerous heteronormative culture at Lenape High School and show LGBTQ+ students they are respected and valued.

Analyzing my data surfaced three additional points. First and foremost, my study demonstrates participants' awareness that including LGBTQ+ authors, literature, and themes, along with applying queer theory can combat the heteronormative culture at Lenape High School. Session 2, which focused on defining heteronormativity and identifying and discussing examples within Lenape High School, especially helped the participants notice how much Lenape is engulfed in heteronormative practices and beliefs. This recognition made them realize how invisible and invalidated LGBTQ+ students feel. However, they also saw that adding LGBTQ+ authors, literature, and themes to the ELA curriculum can begin to validate LGBTQ+ students.

Second, I found room for growth in participants' confidence with implementing queer theory. According to the open-ended survey responses, participants feel less familiar with queer theory, in part, due to a lack of pre-service and in-service training, which aligns with existing scholarship (Payne & Smith, 2011). Sessions 3 and 4 provided

some guidance and opportunities to practice, but as the participants themselves noted, more effort is needed.

Finally, despite my success in increasing participants' comfort, the open-ended responses to Surveys 4 and 5 indicated a need for more training on handling conflict with students, parents, and administrators regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion in the classroom. Exhibiting a lack of confidence during the sessions, as well, the participants felt unprepared to handle students who make inappropriate comments or refuse to analyze literature from a queer perspective. Participants also lacked confidence in adequately responding to parents who do not want their children reading LGBTQ+ literature and administrators who ask teachers to consider all points of view. One participant reflected, "It is hard to address LGBTQ+ inclusion more with administrators when teachers are told to present the 'alternative or opposing view' because what is the opposing view of acceptance and inclusivity?" This comment illustrates the need for more sessions devoted to addressing backlash so ELA teachers can confront resistant parents, students, or administrators in a clear and effective manner.

In sum, my participants gained comfort and knowledge as a result of my intervention. I, as the action researcher, also gained knowledge from my participants, especially through their discussions around queer theory. All eight of my participants, showed a deep concern for making sure they incorporate LGBTQ+ authors, themes, literature, and queer theory into the classroom in a thoughtful and inventive way. They shared new lesson plans with me and offered new perspectives to analyzing poetry. Combating heteronormativity is a team effort and having allies in the ELA department

that are committed to LGBTQ+ inclusion in their classroom will allow their LGBTQ+ students to feel seen and validated

However, I also saw a vital need for continued professional development to build their confidence and reduce their hesitation. Because action research is inherently cyclical (Efron & Ravid 2013), the next session addresses my detailed plans for applying the insights from the current study in my future practice.

### **Action Plan: Implications of the Findings**

To address my participants' lingering lack of confidence, I envision offering professional development on integrating queer theory in their pedagogy. When responding to Survey 5, participants mentioned wanting additional practice with colleagues to analyze literature through a queer perspective. Additional sessions could enable them to practice analyzing poems, short stories, and novels through a queer perspective, likely increasing their confidence. I could also focus on collaborating with the participants to develop pre-reading and post-reading lessons and assessments for approach various works in the curriculum through a queer perspective. I believe the more the participants practice their analytical skills and discuss possible formative and summative assessments, the more confidence, comfort, and knowledge they will gain.

I can also do more to help participants effectively handle problems that may arise with students, parents, and administrators who challenge LGBTQ+ inclusion in ELA classrooms. When responding to Surveys 4 and 5, the participants mentioned their lack of knowledge and comfort in this area. Offering sessions where they can act out various scenarios and discuss their responses would enhance their comfort and knowledge by giving them the opportunity to practice their de-escalating skills. I believe the more

participants practice, the more confident, comfortable, and knowledgeable they will become in being able to address issues in their actual classrooms.

To continually increase the participants' comfort, knowledge, and confidence related to LGBTQ+ inclusion, queer theory, and potential pushback, I will implement the following action plan:

1. Over the summer, I will invite participants to review the literature they will teach in the fall to consider which works they can analyze through a queer perspective. They will plan to discuss a list of these works during the first professional development session of the school year.
2. At the beginning of the school year, I will gather the participants to compare their lists and discuss which works are most conducive to a queer perspective.
3. In late August and early September, I will break participants into groups so they can brainstorm effective ways to analyze two of the works from their list from a queer perspective.
4. In late September and early October, I will invite the participants to share their pedagogical strategies to teach the chosen works from a queer perspective by teaching other group members their lessons.
5. In late October and early November, I will invite the participants to create formative and summative assessments for the chosen works of literature to assess whether teaching through a queer perspective was effective for their students.
6. In November and December, I will invite participants to practice different scenarios regarding how to address conflict with parents, teachers, and administrators who are resistant to LGBTQ+ inclusion in the classroom.



7. In January through April, I will encourage participants to implement their chosen works of literature and teach them through a queer perspective, using the formative and summative assessments in their classrooms.
8. In April and May, I will invite participants to evaluate and discuss the effectiveness of the extra professional development sessions to determine if they feel more comfortable and knowledgeable incorporating queer theory in their classrooms and addressing potential conflicts and issues.

Implementing this action plan should further strengthen my ELA colleagues' comfort and knowledge related to LGBTQ+ inclusion and addressing conflict with parents, students, and administrators.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

I designed and implemented the five professional development sessions in this study to increase my ELA colleagues' comfort with and knowledge of LGBTQ+ terminology, literature, and authors, as well as queer theory. More broadly, I wanted to make them aware of the heteronormative culture at Lenape High School and the role they can play in combatting it. However, future cycles of research could benefit from improved data collection methods and resources.

My repeated-measures approach for Sessions 1, 2, and 3 effectively gauged the overall increase in participants' comfort. However, in a future study, I would make the Likert-scale surveys confidential instead of anonymous. Confidential surveys would have enabled me to track each participant's growth. For example, Figure 4.6 addressed participants' comfort with defining, explaining, and identifying heteronormativity within society and Lenape. The post-session results showed that seven participants chose a 3

(highly comfortable) while one chose a 2 (moderately comfortable). If the open-ended survey questions were not anonymous, I could have interviewed the participant who chose a 2 about the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of the session and target the next professional development session to their needs. As mentioned in Chapter 2, teachers need targeted professional development to address the gender and diversity issues in their school (Towery, 2007).

Similarly, although the open-ended survey questions effectively provided a sense of participants' true opinions and understanding of the sessions, anonymity limited those insights. Conducting one-on-one interviews with each participant would have provided opportunities for deeper discussion of the positive and negative aspects of each session. One-on-one interviews would also help me develop further sessions to provide clarity on concepts that were unclear. Again, if the open-ended survey questions for Session 5 were not anonymous, I could have interviewed the participants for specific works of literature from our ELA curriculum they would like sample lessons about.

In addition to adapting my data collection plan, I would also adjust the focus and approach of some of the sessions themselves. The queer theory discussion in Session 3 and sample lesson plans in Session 5 effectively helped participants envision how to implement LGBTQ+ authors and themes and apply queer theory in their classrooms. However, providing more sample analyses could strengthen participants' capacity to incorporate queer theory into their pedagogy. As with Session 5, which contains sample lessons from the Grade 9 novel, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, specifically, working through a variety of examples across grade levels could increase our likelihood of combatting the heteronormative culture of Lenape High School,

especially if participants begin to use the sample lesson plans as models when designing their own.

Finally, more sessions should center on handling backlash from students, parents, and administrators who may be opposed to LGBTQ+ inclusion in ELA classrooms. Sessions can focus on role-playing scenarios in which teachers can practice addressing conflicts and proper techniques needed to quell potential issues that may arise. Overall, these sessions can help combat a heteronormative high school environment and allow ELA teachers more confidence when introducing LGBTQ+ authors, text, and queer theory, and also help teachers identify aspects of a null curriculum (Eisner, 1985) by incorporating marginalized groups.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, through action research, I joined with my fellow ELA teachers to combat our school's heteronormative culture by increasing their knowledge of and comfort with LGBTQ+ authors, literature, and themes, as well as helping them feel capable of implementing queer theory in their classrooms. Despite participants' increased comfort and knowledge, I found they needed more professional development focused on addressing conflict with those who are resistant to LGBTQ+ inclusion. This chapter presented a concrete action plan for addressing such issues.

ELA teachers need to feel comfortable and confident enough to address potential backlash because marginalized student groups, especially LGBTQ+ students, need a safe school environment where they are able not only to learn without fear but also to see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Through action research, I aimed to combat the heteronormative practices of Lenape High School by providing professional development

to my fellow ELA teachers that would enhance their knowledge of LGBTQ+ authors, themes, literature, and pedagogy and increase their comfort with adapting their classrooms and curriculum accordingly. The professional development sessions offered participants a chance to collaborate on different teaching strategies, issues, and topics regarding the heteronormative culture of Lenape High School and how to combat it through LGBTQ+ inclusion.

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APPENDIX A  
RESEARCH STUDY INVITATION

Hello everyone,

As a doctoral candidate at the University of South Carolina, I am conducting a study as part of the requirements for a degree in Educational Practice and Innovation, and I would like to invite you to participate. My dissertation is focused on promoting inclusivity at our school through targeted professional development. I would like to facilitate such sessions based on your needs/requests related to LGBTQ+ issues, terminology, and literature.

From September through December, participants will complete brief, anonymous surveys on LGBTQ+ terminology, issues, history, and queer theory, both prior to and following four professional development sessions. I welcome your honest perspectives and insights, but you do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. The professional development sessions will last approximately 30–40 minutes and occur in my classroom at a mutually convenient time, such as a lunch period or common planning period. Your participation during the sessions will be confidential, meaning I will not use your real name in my study.

Your participation is also voluntary. Please e-mail me at [REDACTED] by September 12, 2022, if you are willing to participate in my research and e-mail me at any time if you choose to withdraw.

Thank you so much,

Mx. Mustaccio

## APPENDIX B

### SURVEY 1

Before you begin this survey, please know you may stop participating in this research at any time. Please just e-mail me at [nmustaccio@lrhdsd.org](mailto:nmustaccio@lrhdsd.org) to notify me of your choice to opt out of the study.

Scale:

0: Not comfortable

1: Slightly comfortable

2: Moderately comfortable

3: Highly comfortable

1. How comfortable are you with defining LGBTQ+ terminology such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and asexual?
2. How comfortable are you with defining gender identity terminology such as cisgender and transgender?
3. How comfortable are you with defining gender identity terminology such as pangender, genderfluid, genderqueer?
4. How comfortable are you with discussing LGBTQ+ terminology in the classroom?
5. How comfortable are you with discussing gender identity terminology in the classroom?

## APPENDIX C

### SURVEY 2

Before you begin this survey, please know you may stop participating in this research at any time. Please just e-mail me at [nmustaccio@lrhsd.org](mailto:nmustaccio@lrhsd.org) to notify me of your choice to opt out of the study.

Scale:

- 0: Not comfortable
- 1: Slightly comfortable
- 2: Moderately comfortable
- 3: Highly comfortable

1. How comfortable are you with defining the term heteronormative?
2. How comfortable are you with explaining the concept of heteronormativity?
3. How comfortable are you with identifying examples of heteronormativity in our society?
4. How comfortable are you with identifying examples of heteronormativity in our school?

## APPENDIX D

### SURVEY 3

Before you begin this survey, please know you may stop participating in this research at any time. Please just e-mail me at [nmustaccio@lrhdsd.org](mailto:nmustaccio@lrhdsd.org) to notify me of your choice to opt out of the study.

Scale:

- 0: Not comfortable
- 1: Slightly comfortable
- 2: Moderately comfortable
- 3: Highly comfortable

1. How comfortable are you with defining queer literary theory?
2. How comfortable are you with explaining the main concepts of queer theory?
3. How comfortable are you with analyzing works of literature through a queer perspective?

## APPENDIX E

### SURVEY 4

Before you begin this survey, please know you may stop participating in this research at any time. Please just e-mail me at [nmustaccio@lrhsd.org](mailto:nmustaccio@lrhsd.org) to notify me of your choice to opt out of the study.

1. Can you identify any LGBTQ+ authors in our ELA curriculum? If yes, please list the authors. If no, please explain why you cannot identify any authors.
2. Do you feel comfortable discussing an author's sexual orientation or gender identity in your classroom? Why/Why not?
3. What topic(s) from the professional development session, if any, is/are unclear? Please be specific and include any questions you have about the information we discussed.



## APPENDIX F

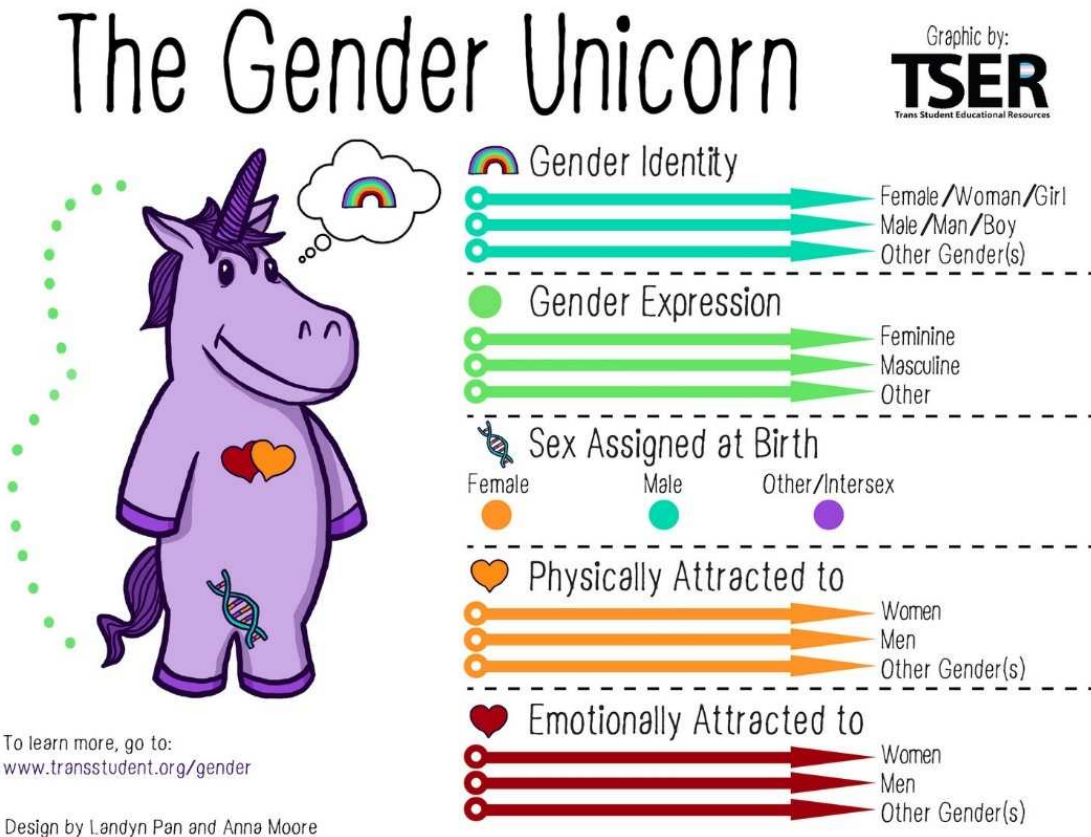
### SURVEY 5

Before you begin this survey, please know you may stop participating in this research at any time. Please just e-mail me at [nmustaccio@lrhsd.org](mailto:nmustaccio@lrhsd.org) to notify me of your choice to opt out of the study.

1. What topic(s) from the final professional development session, if any, is/are unclear? Please be specific and include any questions you have about the information we discussed.
2. After attending the professional development sessions, how do you feel about teaching LGBTQ+ terminology, authors, literature, or queer theory?
3. What other LGBTQ+ topics or teaching strategies would you like to address in future professional development sessions?

## APPENDIX G

### THE GENDER UNICORN



From Trans Student Educational Resources (2015)