

**A Negotiation of Prudence and Pride: An Examination of Lesbian Teachers'
Perceptions and Definitions of Safety**

Victoria A. Best

Mount Saint Vincent University

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Abstract

The purpose of this work was to study the lives of six lesbian teachers in Nova Scotia to better understand how their perceptions of safety affect their daily existence as educators. As a result of feeling unsafe, some lesbian teachers fracture their lives into public and private spheres where social practices contribute to their isolation, silence, and marginalization. Central to understanding these phenomena was an exploration of how hegemonic, patriarchal norms are reproduced in the school system. The goal of this research was to lend a voice to often silenced women and provide them with an opportunity to validate their experiences while recognizing their existence and identity.

The participants were selected using a snowball sampling method where they partook in semi-structured interviews. Under the central theme of safety, these interviews focused on the women's professional experiences, relationships within the school community, their position as role models, and the areas most requiring change in the education system.

The data collection process employed a phenomenological research strategy using open, descriptive, and analytical coding. The data analysis was informed from a position of critical feminist theory while employing discourse and conversational analysis.

Chapter 1

Lesbian Teachers, Social Structures and Dominant Discourses

Whether a woman identifies herself as lesbian with pride or with hesitation, as a teacher she always has to say it with caution (Khayatt, 1992, p. 114).

While many minority groups face prejudice and discrimination in our society, few face such hostility without the support of their communities or family members. The same cannot be said for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and two-spirited¹ community; too often they endure alone the struggles of society. Unlike skin colour, sexuality is not distinguishable by appearance; it is not palpably obvious. Should a lesbian teacher choose to have her identity recognized she must repeatedly come out. This process can be continuous and is often perceived as dangerous by lesbian teachers. For the women who decide to remain silent and not acknowledge their sexuality, considerable energy is spent managing their identity. It was the aim of this study to better understand how the education system and its practices contributed to an environment that is perceived as unsafe and not conducive for some lesbian teachers to come out or disclose their sexual identity.

An event can be discrete but how it is perceived and interpreted may be as varied as the diverse experiences of the women in this study. Lesbian teachers may share similar experiences, yet each woman can create a *constructed reality* that is specific to her and based on personal meaning. While focusing on the women's perceptions and definition of safety, another objective of this study was to examine the social structures and dominant discourses that often shape the lives and views of some lesbian teachers. In this shaping, women construct knowledge regarding their societal rank and their position in power relationships. Occurrences such as homophobia and heterosexism can significantly affect the daily lives of some lesbian teachers; an aim of this

study was also to better understand how discrimination was perceived by the participants and how the knowledge they constructed from such events impacted their decision to come out. This decision to come out is fundamental to this research because it is often influenced by multiple contextual factors that are rooted in a woman's assessment of safety. Often a patriarchal, heteronormative society denies the identities, the worth, and the very existence of some lesbian teachers. For the purpose of this study it was important to recognize and investigate how hegemonic practices that silence lesbians are reproduced in the education system.

The significance and necessity of this study lies not in the execution of a research method or my prowess as a researcher, but in the voices of the women that participated. This study offers a space for these women to be heard, for their identities to be celebrated, and for the oppression they face to be acknowledged. The political rhetoric of the education system promotes the necessity and value of "diversity" but before such a lofty goal can be accomplished, the practices that promote discrimination must be exposed and challenged. By providing a voice and encouraging women to assume an active role in this research, change is possible.

When proposing and considering this research, I thought the purpose of this study would be rooted in the exposing and elimination of homophobia in Nova Scotia schools. This preliminary purpose was influenced by the fact that for the past six years I have worked as a teacher in Nova Scotia and I have had firsthand experience with homophobia and heterosexism in the education system. I have watched as lesbian teachers have been intimidated by parents of students, the students themselves, and colleagues. I've watched as they recoil in fear; this is not acceptable, and ignoring the problem will never help.

However, after interviewing women I quickly realized that the true merit of this research was in examining how women personally determined and defined safety. In analyzing the

participants' constructed meaning of safety it was essential to consider what they perceived as the contributory factors. Consequently, when schools were regarded as unsafe, some lesbian teachers chose to fracture their lives into disjointed, unhealthy spheres where their only choices involved hiding and managing their sexual identity, therefore compromising themselves. This compromise of self often left the women frustrated or scared with inner turmoil that affected their daily lives as educators. After meeting these women I have refined my original position; they showed me that multiple aspects of their lives must be considered if positive change is to occur.

Use of Language

Language is not simply an expression of a perceived meaning but instead language constructs meaning [and] although meanings cannot be fixed, we live our lives as though they are. The appearance of fixity is maintained through the suppression of its opposite (Hughes, 2002, p. 14-15).

For many societal groups (often those not marginalized) the issue of naming is nonexistent or does not seem to be important, but within the LGBTTT community these topics are central to our constructed identity. Throughout this study, attention will be paid to the use of language and the bias certain words connote. In 1989 The American Psychological Association (APA), in conjunction with a committee regarding lesbian and gay concerns, developed guidelines to reduce the use of biased language with respect to lesbian and gay issues. These recommendations are regularly reviewed and updated. Thus, in adhering to the recommendations of the APA, I will use the word *lesbian* to describe women involved in same-sex relationships and forgo the use of *gay* as an encompassing term since it is more frequently applied to men

involved in same-sex relationships. However, further analysis will occur pertaining to how participants self-identify, and the social acceptability of certain terms and labels.

The term *queer* is often used to represent the collective communities of lesbians, gay men, bisexual women and men, transgendered women and men, and two-spirited women and men. Like many authors, Sheila Cavanaugh (2007) and Linda Garber (1994), use the word queer to recognize the fluidity of identity and sexuality, while Sarah Chinn (1994) uses queer in an attempt to reclaim the word. Although use of the word queer marks an uneasiness with static definitions, it also envelopes and negates the identities of unique groups. It is also sometimes a concern that for some readers, using the word queer further reinforces the sexual “other” by collectively grouping all non-heterosexual persons.

There are times when the use of labels is necessary. As Jacqueline Zita (1994) contends, using the word queer solidifies “a duality of oppression forged by heterosexual hegemony and its mandate of gender consonance” (p. 258). By grouping all community members under the category “queer” all individual identities are essentially negated. Rachel Walker (2004) discusses the term queer and notes the historical connotation of perversion and illegitimacy, which rendered its recipient powerless and victimized. For many researchers there is a fear that the word “queer” will never transcend its blemished history:

The main reason why the self-application of ‘queer’ by activists has proved so volatile is that there’s no way that any amount of affirmative reclamation is going to succeed in detaching the word from its associations with shame and with the terrifying powerlessness of gender-dissonant or otherwise stigmatized childhood (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 4).

Throughout this text, for the above-outlined reasons, I will use the acronym LBTT to represent lesbians, gay men, bisexual persons, transgendered persons, and two-spirited persons unless the term queer is used in a direct quote or in the self-identification of a participant. It should be noted that Two-Spirited persons are someone of Native ancestry who received a gift from the Creator to house both female and male spirits; this is/was seen as a third gender by Native peoples prior to European colonization. This term is not all encompassing and is subject to debate. Various identities occur under this heading depending on the tribe of origin.

Homophobia Close to Home

As long as school authorities are able to give rational reasons for their actions when challenged, they usually prevail over an individual claiming prejudice or unfair employment practices (Harbeck, 1992, p. 131-132).

In my role as a researcher, it was fundamental that I enter this process from an informed position. The historical invisibility and silencing of lesbians, women, and female teachers is paramount to the constructed realities of the participants involved in this study. I had to consider the possibility that these women had suffered systemic homophobia and had their integrity questioned based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation. Understanding historical and societal implications surrounding homophobia is crucial but it is also imperative to consider specific events that possibly shape the lives and experiences of lesbian teachers.

For lesbian teachers in Nova Scotia, it was imperative that I consider one specific incident that may have been significant to their lived experiences and current situations. On Friday, September 8th, 2000, late in the afternoon, two male teachers at a local Halifax high school witnessed an out lesbian teacher, Lindsay Willow, and a female student leave a locker

room. The men perceived the incident as the teacher's attempt to "sneak" the student out of the change room after what they believed to be a sexual encounter. One of the male teachers approached a vice-principal and conveyed his concern regarding the "suspicious" activity and stated that he believed the incident to possibly be of a "sexual nature". The vice-principal then spoke with the principal who subsequently spoke with the male teachers, a school board employee, and a community liaison police officer. After these conversations (note the lack of conversation with Lindsay Willow or the student) the principal called the police, who investigated, found no evidence of wrong doing, and laid no charges. Ms. Willow never received an apology.

The two male teachers negated to mention or consider that the locker room was connected to a bathroom, where Ms. Willow and the student were in fact washing their hands after moving gym equipment. The male teachers made incorrect assumptions and horrendously damaging accusations based on Ms. Willow's sexual orientation, thus fitting all criteria of a homophobic act. As a result of this incident and the unjust treatment that followed, Lindsay Willow launched a complaint under the Nova Scotia *Human Rights Act*, claiming that John Orlando (one of the male teachers involved), Gordon Young (then principal), and the Halifax Regional School Board discriminated against her on the basis of her sexual orientation. The second teacher involved, Rick Kitley, died before the Human Rights Commission could hear the complaint and was not named in the suit. In the spring of 2006, after a very public and sensationalized inquiry, the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission agreed with Lindsay Willow, that in fact she was discriminated against based on her sexual orientation (perceived or otherwise) and was not protected or granted the same defences as her heterosexual, male colleagues (Thompson for N.S. Human Rights Commission, 2006).

The details of this case were much publicized, receiving local and national coverage. Such coverage frequently discussed the roles of teachers and the rights to openly disclose their sexual orientation. For the sake of clarification in this writing, several participants worked in the same school board, and all participants belonged to the same union as Ms. Willow. The role of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU) was pivotal to this case. The NSTU funded the defence of John Orlando and Dr. Gordon Young, while Lindsay Willow was left to absorb the cost of her legal representation.

To work from an informed position, I had to consider that this event was relevant to research pertaining to lesbian teachers in Nova Scotia and would surface in conducted interviews. One objective of this research was to better understand how other lesbian teachers perceived this event and if it did or does impact their daily lives as educators.

Theoretical Framework

Sexuality is not the truth of human nature that we struggle to keep under control. [It] is the pretext, the theoretical assumption necessary for a whole set of complex cultural and political developments. Sexuality and sexual pleasure [are] systems of behaviour that individuals act out under the influence of historically conditioned forms of knowledge (Fuery & Mansfield, 2000, p. 187).

To examine the lives and experiences of lesbian teachers in Nova Scotia one must first consider how women are positioned in society; hegemonic discourses appropriate and govern women's sexuality, deny their autonomy, and judge them based on their relationships with men. It was pertinent to the purpose of this study to understand how lesbian teachers interacted within their school communities, how they chose to identify, and how they viewed the impact of their

sexuality on their jobs and everyday life. Within these topics additional focus was paid to the participant's views on the concept of "teacher as role model", their definition of "outness" or the continuum on which they manage their identities, and the fractured nature of their professional relationships.

Whether as a result of a patriarchal heteronormative society or an oppressive education system, many lesbian teachers choose to hide their sexuality and their lives become dichotomized into public and private spheres or existences. A major objective of this study was to provide a voice to often silenced women and understand what homophobia "looks like" for them. It was also imperative to explore how sexual orientation, whether perceived or otherwise, shaped their careers and relationships. In her 1992 qualitative study of 18 lesbian teachers in Ontario's public school system, Didi Khayatt discussed participants who expressed overwhelming feelings of guilt associated with their inability to act as "honest" role models for their students. It was important to understand if this phenomenon was still occurring in Nova Scotia today and if so, why, as Khayatt's research is 17 years old with many legal and societal changes having occurred as a result of the publicity surrounding the same-sex marriage debate, and its consequences.

Critical Theories Which Inform This Work

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the

strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power (Foucault, 1980, p. 105-106).

The perception, definition, and manifestation of power are central to this study. It is Michel Foucault's position that power is not a monolithic, static force; rather it is a socially constructed relationship that possesses variability and creates subject and subjectivity. As Patrick Fuery and Nick Mansfield (2000) describe, "power does not operate to repress our naturally occurring selves. Instead, it maps out whole sets of actions and characteristics in taxonomies of possibility in which we as individuals are to be located" (p. 188). For the purpose of this study, the lives of lesbian teachers in their schools and community are intrinsically linked to historically conditioned forms of power and knowledge that position them as "others". This positioning combined with manifestations of power contributes to the participant's perception of safety.

According to Foucault, the mode for the operation of power is not in the oppression of sexuality but in the identification, classification, and ranking of differences. For the participants of this study it was fundamental to understand their perception of how they rank on the societal ladder and the power relationships that impact and shape their lives. For it is in the struggles, the negotiations, and the processes that power takes form; a representation of power that Foucault referred to as a "terminal form" of power. Yet these "terminal forms" of power are unstable and fluid because they must exist in context and subjectivity.

Judith Butler (1997) draws on Foucault's theory of power in her examination of ethics, power, and gendered identity. To explain the process of female subjection, Butler discusses what she terms the "paradox of subjection". The paradox lies in the fact that subjectivity is founded on subjection and to be a subject of society one must be subjected to its order. Butler writes:

"Subjection signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of

becoming a subject” (p. 11). Lesbian teachers are regularly subjected to “terminal forms” of power that silence their voices, repress their identity, and regulate their behaviour. Like Foucault, I was interested in “technologies of the self” or the individual that results from living in regulated forms of behaviour. It was also important to understand how the role of power affects the creation of knowledge and shapes a lesbian teacher’s perception of the world.

To attempt to understand the lives and experiences of lesbian educators it was essential to work within a critical paradigm that dissects and contextualizes the “terminal forms” of power inequalities within society. To work from a critical theory paradigm allows a researcher to investigate the hierarchal, dualistic nature of the world in which lesbian teachers and women live. “While it [critical theory] is characterized by shared core philosophical concerns” to concretely define critical theory is impossible, for its proponents “exhibits diversity that [contributes] to its richness” (Rush, 2004, p. 2). These shared ideas stress the importance of multiple realities which are influenced by historical contexts and labour to confront social oppression at whatever level it occurs.

Feminist Epistemologies

For feminists, the purpose of epistemology is not only to satisfy intellectual curiosity, but also to contribute to an emancipatory goal. This goal requires that our epistemologies make it possible to see how knowledge is authorized and who is empowered by it (Alcoff and Porter, 1993, p. 13-14).

William Weirama and Stephen Jurs (2005) define epistemology as “a branch of philosophy that investigates the origin, methods, and limits of human knowledge” (p. 201). It is the connection between this definition and the central tenets of feminism which are significant

for the context of this study. Like critical theory, today's concept of feminist epistemologies is fluid. Many feminists, including myself, recognize the role of gender as only one marker that oppresses women, with issues of race, religion, class, sexuality, culture, ability, and age equally affecting power relationships within society. As Linda Alcoff & Elizabeth Potter (1993) contend, "gender identity cannot be adequately understood—or even *perceived*—except as a component of complex interrelationships with other systems of identification and hierarchy" (p. 3).

A focus of this study was to question how lesbian teachers construct knowledge from their experiences, which are highly contextualised in an androcentric society. It is my position that the process of knowing and creating knowledge is not universal or objective. As Lorraine Code (1993) so eloquently explains,

Knowing facts is part of [knowing] but the knowledge involved is more than and different from its proportional parts. Nor is this knowledge reducible to the simple observational knowledge of the traditional paradigms. The fact that it is acquired differently, interactively, and relationally differentiates it both as process and as product (p. 34).

For the analysis portion of this study, feminist epistemologies are essential. Not only are some lesbian teachers disadvantaged because they are lesbians, they are also marginalized because they are female. However, this perspective of marginality creates an opportunity to understand the stratified social hierarchies that impact the lives of women everywhere.

As Charlotte Bunch (1995) explains, the battle for human rights will never end as long as women's rights are ignored. In fact, it is her position that human rights are not fixed and must evolve to include a diverse group of women that collectively face similar oppressions. Working

from a feminist perspective allows me to conduct a study that is not just about women but for women.

Review of Literature

Attempting to conduct a thorough literature review on the history and experiences of lesbian teachers proved somewhat challenging. Related material, in either research forums or in academic literature of all forms, was sparse and when it did exist little was specific to Canadian teachers, and much of it was dated. As a result, the literature reviewed in this section contains American, Australian, and British works as well as Canadian. Since this research is specifically Canadian, the context of this literature review will focus predominantly on the history of lesbian teacher in Western capitalist societies because, like Khayatt (1992), I am assuming they share similar historical trends.

Historical Impact

“Expectations” and “appropriateness” have been dominant discourses in the lives and histories of women and it was here that I chose to begin my inquiry of lesbian teachers. Recognizing the history of the LGBTTT community is central to understanding how my participants construct their identity (or how their identity is constructed for them) and how they are positioned in society.

In the early Victorian period, sexual politics created a society that viewed women as “passionless, incapable of sexual feelings, submitting to male aggressive desire only for the purpose of procreation” (Khayatt, 1992, p. 15). This notion of women as submissive objects set the foundation for an era rife with androcentric discourses that constructed the lesbian identity as either inverted or perverted. As pertinent as the discussion of sexuality may be, the construction

of gender is equally, if not more significant, to appreciating the societal placement of today's lesbians. As Khayatt (1992) explains, "Victorian polarization of gender roles, which dictated social behaviour, provided the paradigm for gender-based sexual expectations. A woman who actively desired another woman ceased to be a woman, [she] became masculinized" (p. 15). Khayatt argues that it was this "masculinization" of lesbians and ultimately the fear of power-sharing that caused (and continues to cause) a homophobic society with gender-reserved roles.

As the twentieth century unfolded, societal discourse pertaining to sexuality and gender roles transitioned from religious and legal rhetoric to the newly dominant medical model that became the dominant sexual ideology. It was this ideology that saw the perception and definition of homosexuality shift from a "moral sin" to a medical disorder. This outlook of an underlying pathology haunted the participants of Khayatt's 1992 study and still affects the daily lives of lesbian teachers. All of Khayatt's participants communicated that they felt society perceived them as "unnatural" or "deviant", even though homosexual acts were removed from the list of psychiatric disorders in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1973.

Social Construction of the Spinster Teacher

The role of teacher was (and some would argue still is) seen as an extension of the domestic culture constantly reproduced in a patriarchal society. Although many early female teachers were nuns, when those who were not first entered the teaching profession they were very much second-class citizens who were paid less, restricted more, and perceived as disposable by men. However, as Khayatt (1992) explains, this was in fact one of the first economic liberations for women. Becoming a teacher provided women with "independence outside of marriage" and an opportunity to define themselves. However, women who chose teaching as a

career were often saddled with the label of “one of the most recognizable and prevalent stereotypes, [that] of a spinster teacher” (Khayatt, 192, p. 43).

Through the history of Western capitalist societies, the spinster teacher has been portrayed as callous, lacking a sense of humour, short-haired, and masculine. This persona has historically been equated with lesbians. As Khayatt contends, not all spinster teachers were lesbians but by coding them as “others” or person outside the dominant heterosexual, married norm, their status was often affected and their respectability challenged.

It is important for the context of this study, to note that this negative persona still impacts the socially constructed identities of today’s lesbian teachers. Female teachers whose marital status is obscure, are labeled as lesbians irrelevant of their sexual preference. The hegemonic ideology of the school system grants privilege to heterosexual, “feminine” women, who reflect the acceptable gender norm of society. Many school boards continue to be male dominated at the administration level (Khayatt, 1992) and as Karen Harbeck (1991) explains, lesbians, especially those in education, have been hidden from history and when they are included, it is done so in a derogatory manner that often perpetuates the oppressive image of homosexuals as deviants.

Hegemonic Discourses of Society

Ideology works to preserve the status quo of those who have the power to enforce it.

Gramsci calls this group the “hegemonic class,” by which he means “a class which has been able to articulate the interests of other social groups to its own by means of ideological struggle (Khayatt, 1992, p. 63).

Khayatt’s reference to Antonio Gramsci and his definitions of the “hegemonic class” are central to this work and although Gramsci’s central concern was to understand class dynamics,

his concept of a “dominant group” directly applies to the sexual and social hierarchy experienced by lesbian teachers. Throughout this text the use of the word “hegemony” will refer to the whole range of structures, institutions, and activities, plus the values, attitudes, and beliefs that support the established order and its privileged members.

The heteronormativity that exists within school systems relegates lesbians to the lower ranks of what is deemed socially acceptable. British authors Debbi Epstein and Richard Johnson (1998) attempted to understand the connections between sexuality and dominant national ideologies. Central to understanding this relationship is the concept of “national identity”, a concept transferable to North American culture and the women that participated in this study.

Epstein and Johnson define this term as a discourse that takes the “practices of the state or of other institutions that take the national voice, continuously regulate other social identities, differentially representing or recognizing them” (p. 18) and therefore negating a more pluralistic concept of a nation. The notion of “belonging” is critical to understanding a national identity. Epstein and Johnson propose that national identity, and subsequently a national character, “puts all the citizens in their places; it defines who belongs and who [does not]” (p. 18). The perception of belonging is often mandated by a set of socially dominated constructs which validate certain community groups while marginalizing others. Although the United Kingdom is a highly cross-cultural country, Epstein and Johnson suggest that those who belong to the national identity as people are male, white, heterosexual, middle- to upper-class, able to procreate through a traditional heterosexual relationship, and who are able-bodied. Anything outside of this rigid framework is seen as an “other”, thus not truly belonging, or being “unnatural” in some way.

The idea, or perhaps the ideal, of the family is heavily present in the nationalism that Epstein and Johnson describe. The procreating heterosexual couple as essential to the family ideal has been, and continues to be, privileged by the state. It is here that conventional gender roles are emphasized and the focus lies on the appropriateness of women and their aspirations. The “male dominance of the public sphere” extends to the definition of the “national family” where the husband is the virile provider and maintains control. Women’s roles are situated in the domestic sphere where they are viewed as “reproducers of the nation” who lack sexual desire and are expected to represent the “heart, spirit or essence” of the nation.

This definition of the family underlines the hierarchical nature of sexuality. The ideal couple is heterosexual, so any same-sex or non-procreating couple, is defined in contrast to the dominant norm and labelled as “other”. The perception of homosexual couples is that they are outside the moral traditions of the nation, a view often reinforced through the practice of organized religion(s). Within the privilege of the dominant class lies power. This power not only has innumerable discrete advantages but it also determines just how much a person belongs. Regrettably, the less you belong the more you struggle and the more you struggle the less chance you have of belonging.

Identity and Invisibility

Gender classification differs from that of sex in the sense that whereas the former is totally socially constructed, the other is biologically based. However, what [they] have in common is that, like the notions of male and female sex, gender is in fact an arbitrary dichotomy imposed upon what is essentially a continuum (Arnot, 2002, p. 118).

Although this study only involved women (as participants and researcher), gender will serve as one attribute for defining identity and is in no way separable from race, religion, class, sexuality, culture, ability, and age. The notion of gender as a continuum and its social construction is one that emerged during the women's liberation movement (Tarrant, 2006). Feminist perspectives contend that through social constructs such as the family, the division of labour, and sexuality, gender is created and upheld as opposed to any inherent gendered identity (Butler, 1997). People embody a particular gender classification and "externalise their gender identities through behaviour, language, their use of objects, [and] their physical presence" (Arnot, 2002, p. 121). It was the intent of this study to explore how the participants interpreted gender and what effects it has on their professions of teachers and identity as lesbian.

For the participants of this study, discussions of gender were predominantly superseded by conversations surrounding sexuality. One exception occurred when the women discussed how they believed they were viewed and treated by the school boards for which they worked. As one of the primary defining features of the individual, Foucault viewed sexuality as a conduit through which power relationships are exercised. The societal creation of sexuality and its ever changing uniqueness is a common theme of feminist theory (Adams, 1997; Kimmel, 2000).

The discussion of gender holds significance for this study because the women involved self-identified with sexual orientations that exist on a continuum and those that have been fluid throughout their lives. Some women chose varying labels for their sexual preference while some expressed contempt for classifications altogether. It is Khayatt's (1992) position that "lesbian identity" is as diverse and as complex as the participants, where "each woman who names herself as [non-heterosexual] has undergone a process of coming out" and this process "involves a

reiteration of one's identity over and over in different situations because of hegemonic presumptions of heterosexuality" (p. 113).

Imperative to research with lesbian teachers is the matter of identity and consequently invisibility. To identify, or be identified, as a lesbian (or however the women self-identified) is a direct contradiction to the societal norm and "although the recent women's and gay movement have reclaimed the word, *lesbian* remains an admission that a woman has rejected part(s) of the normative social organization" (Khayatt, 1992, p. 114). For those who reclaim the word "lesbian", it conveys a rich social history and a way of being which consists of much more than the act of sex between two women. The process of reclaiming identity occurs because "identity is granted to us merely in relation to the constructed ideologies of the heterosexual and patriarchal order" and "the very notion of existing as someone who, by societal definitions, still exists outside of any reproductive and patriarchal model, enables the presence of a subversive identity" (Walker, 2004, p. 5).

Although the studies of Khayatt (1992), Garber (1994), and Ann Pelligrini (1994), were qualitative in design and made no attempt to make any generalizations, there were prevailing themes that intrinsically linked their participants. The struggle of fear versus pride with respect to living openly was a sentiment frequently vocalized. Most of the participants expressed feelings of conflict and even guilt surrounding their inability to come out to their students and colleagues. Considering and understanding these internal conflicts are central to the construction of identity. One participant in Khayatt's study expressed her frustration when being asked by a student if she was straight: "the idea underneath all of this is that I'm straight, but I'm supportive, which didn't feel fair to me. I felt guilty afterwards because I knew that I gave her

that impression” (p. 183). In the context of this study it was critical to know if women still felt this way and why.

Being invisible is commonplace for some lesbian teachers. Khayatt describes it best as “hiding, deflecting, and omitting” (p. 143): some lesbian teachers frequently hide their sexual orientation, their relationships, and their identity; they hear and deflect the homophobic remarks. They are also faced with the difficult choice to emit an air of heterosexuality or isolate themselves, thus eliminating the possibility of being supported. It is this last action, known as “passing,” that was the most degrading for many of Khayatt’s participants; many women reported that the process of lying and remaining invisible proved detrimental to their careers, their relationships, and most significantly, their sense of self.

For many teachers the dilemma of coming out is a decision never made lightly. As described by Kate Adams and Kim Emery (1994) in the article titled *Classroom Coming Out Stories*, teachers often feel as if they are “teaching with one hand tied behind [their] back” (p. 26) where the anxiety of dismissal is often trumped by the fear of being ostracized. Several educators who participated in Adams’ and Emery’s study agreed that they made themselves indispensable to the institution before coming out, therefore making criticism or dismissal more difficult. It is fundamental to this research to understand if the participants experience similar emotions. Significant to this discussion is the fact that in 2009, as Canadian citizens, the women who participated in this study are legally protected under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and as a teacher in Nova Scotia they are further safeguarded by a Human Rights Act. Under both legislations a person cannot be fired or demoted based on their sexual orientation; however, for many lesbian teachers there still exists the fear of being ostracized or falsely accused of some sexually deviant act.

As Khayatt (1992) so expressively states:

The danger lies, not in the knowledge of a lesbian's sexuality itself, but in the implications such as a life has on normative, patriarchally prescribed female lives. The danger lies in women universally, but in different ways, becoming conscious of our strengths outside of men and regardless of our sexual preferences. The danger lies, finally, in all these invisible options becoming visible, and therefore possible, therefore potent (p. 243).

Teachers as Role Models

The creation of a safe space is critical for LGBTTT youth to become healthy adults but establishing such an environment tends to be a source of internal conflict for LGBTTT teachers. As noted by Karen Harbeck (1991), invisibility is present nowhere more than in our schools and amongst LGBTTT teachers. The teachers interviewed by Sherry Woods and Karen Harbeck "felt that their avoidance of potentially gay and lesbian students was a betrayal of these young people" and by hiding their own sexual orientation "they were failing to be positive role models" (p. 155).

These feelings of guilt add one more struggle to the already demanding lives of LGBTTT teachers and were an area of great interest for this study. When Woods and Harbeck interviewed lesbian physical education teachers, patterns of "identity management techniques" emerged. These "techniques" included passing as heterosexual for some, self-distancing for others, and self-distancing from issues of homosexuality. Many participants reported that through the practice of self-distancing they often ignored, or pretended not to hear, homophobic comments being made in their classrooms, thus leaving them feeling "deeply upset about their own failure

to intervene” (p. 154). For the objective of this research to be met it was critical to understand how actions such as these contributed to, or were influenced by, the women’s sense of safety.

For many LGBTTT educators being a positive role model is something they believe to be essential for all their students, not just those belonging to the LGBTTT community. All sides of this coming out debate were well represented in Garber’s (1994) work. Several teachers described their trepidation surrounding the coming out process, yet most agreed that it was necessary not only to achieve the highest level of instruction but vital to their personal wellbeing. Pellegrini (1994), a lesbian professor, vocalizes the emotional stamina it takes to hide: “what I could not sustain was the energy required to keep my methodologies sufficiently disciplined, my politics polite, and above all my closet tidy” (p. 74). Pellegrini goes on to discuss the value of students seeing a positive example of a lesbian and argues that since her marginalization as a lesbian is central to the discourse, to teach any material relating to LGBTTT studies from a closet would be irresponsible.

Although there are laws and human rights policies that are supposed to protect teachers, for some, as seen in this research, the fear of accusations, ostracism, and exposure gravely outweighs their theoretical “legal safety”. Fortunately there are both heterosexual and LGBTTT teachers who support LGBTTT youth, and there is the potential for positive change. As passionately described by Harbeck and echoed by her fellow authors, “A united front of heterosexual and homosexual teachers would be a powerful political force and would provide positive role modeling of acceptance for and appreciation of diversity” (p. 162).

For lesbian teachers who bravely continue to come out to colleagues and students some still struggle and work to release the fear that something untoward will happen. This fear keeps

classrooms “vacant arenas for change, with lesbian and gay teachers, the real catalysts for change, looking out the peepholes of their closet doors” (Harbeck, 1991, p. 134).

This invisibility of members of the LGBTTT community directly impacts the experiences of LGBTTT youth. The intangible identity of LGBTTT teachers tends to leave its youth “deprived of a sense of community with teens left on their own to construct a social identity” (D’Augelli, 1991, p. 214). At a time when information and support are essential, LGBTTT youth are often abandoned by their school as well as their community. Rarely are LGBTTT issues included in the mainstream curriculum, with the exception of its occasional presence in health or human sexuality classes. When Anthony D’Augelli interviewed LGBTTT youth most had no knowledge of historic events such as the Stonewall Riots or the persecution of homosexuals in World War II. One student even commented that he had no idea that gay novels (with the exception of pornography) existed.

As noted by Mariamne Whatley (1991), images of gays and lesbians in school textbooks usually maintain the hegemonic norms through homophobia and heterosexism. Whatley’s examination of text books also revealed that the manner in which homosexuality is portrayed preserves negative stereotypes. Most images were of white, young, able-bodied, and militant individuals, thereby ignoring the rich diversity of the LGBTTT community.

The Teacher and Sexualization

Female teachers have a history fraught with discrimination, where their sex disadvantaged them, their education differentiated them, and their devotion and commitment were rarely recognized. Female teachers have historically been depicted as maternal figures with altruistic intentions rooted in love, care, and salvation, while the school, an institutional taxonomy, represents a symbolic home where the moral majority is represented and traditional

gender and sex roles are reinforced. For lesbian teachers this institutionalized reproduction of hegemonic norms is especially problematic. When a teacher stands in front of a class she does so as a representative of the state and thus, a purveyor of hegemonic, patriarchal ideologies. Yet if she is to reveal her lesbian sexuality she is, in fact, rejecting the dominant norm which she has been hired to maintain and reproduce. For the women involved in Khayatt's (1992) study, this personal/professional divide created dichotomized lives where participants invisibly passed as heterosexual in the public sphere, while struggling with feelings of guilt and worthlessness.

Historically teachers have stood *in loco parentis*, a position where they assume the legal responsibility for students in the absence of their parents. The traditional process of coding female teachers as "mother" creates another professional hurdle for lesbian teachers to overcome. Lesbian teachers "by definition, stand as a contradiction to the concept of *in loco parentis* since it is always assumed that homosexuality precludes parenting" (Khayatt, 1992 p. 171). This preclusion is another example of how lesbian teachers are positioned as "others" in school systems that promote heterosexual hegemony.

Matters pertaining to the LGBTT community are often sexualized and as a result the scrutiny of the teacher-student relationship becomes more prevalent. This increased surveillance has the potential to leave teachers leery and even paranoid. For lesbian teachers, the apprehension of exposure, unfounded accusations, and unjust criticism can prove to be emotionally incapacitating and professionally devastating.

Unfounded accusations and public scandal can obliterate a career. Additionally, however, the occurrence of such scandals adds a dimension to the analysis of political discourse that reaffirms the construction and reproduction of the dominant social norms. Epstein and Johnson (1998) define politicians, elected officials, and public servants as "political elites" because

dominant social discourses are deeply embedded in national politics where the members tend to reflect the privileged social groups, with the press as “the medium of politics” and acting as the moral regulator of the nation.

There is a very rigid order to the hierarchy of political scandals which highlight privilege, oppression, and “otherness”. Topping this ranking of ill repute are scandals that involve homosexual activity. More specifically, the most notorious scandals tend to expose political elites who are involved in married heterosexual relationships but are secretly engaging in homosexual sex. This type of scandal wins the title of “most scandalous” because it is most contradictory to the “national identity”. It violates the ideals of the heterosexual couples, the privileged sexuality, the sanctity of the institute of marriage, and assaults the idealized family (Epstein & Johnson, 1998).

Sex scandals also “reproduce conventional power discrepancies between men and women” (Epstein & Johnson, 1998, p. 91) and the portrayal of women is frequently misogynistic. As in the cases cited by Epstein and Johnson, women in general tend to be typecast into one of two roles, either the victimized wife or the sexually deviant mistress. The victimized wife is seen as stupid, naïve, or weak, with the mistress viewed as a “gold-digger” or whore whose intent was to inflict pain. Equalling degrading is when the mistress is also perceived as the victim who was duped by the cunning, more intelligent man. However, men are typically forgiven for their indiscretions and their mistakes are often justified, thus removing the individual responsibility.

As a result of lesbian teachers’ sexuality being perceived as deviant they rank socially lower than heterosexual women and the phenomena of public panic surrounding teacher-student sex scandals is intensified because the female teacher is socially coded as mother and the student

as child. By appealing to professionalism, moral discourse, and the innocence of childhood, the public can present its concern as pure without having to blatantly acknowledge their investment in a heteronormative society. Homosexuality and pedophilia have been coupled throughout history and teachers who are accused of engaging in relationships with students of the same sex are publicly labeled as the epitome of deviancy, thus increasing the risk factor for lesbian teacher who wish to come out (Cavanaugh, 2007).

Epstein and Johnson also believe that schooling, sexual education programs, and teachers are significant contributors to the constructed societal perception of what is sexually acceptable. Their investigation of sexual education programs in the United Kingdom revealed curricula steeped in moralism that “promotes sexual abstinence as the only acceptable course” (Epstein & Johnson, 1998, p. 174). This system is yet another institution that reinforces the notion of the hegemonic national identity that aids in further division of the genders and, by locating itself in a biological discourse/“natural” discourse, reproduces heterosexism.

It is impossible to discuss sex education programs and not mention the teachers that deliver these curricula. As Epstein and Johnson point out, teachers have historically been desexualized and “bear the primary responsibility for the de-sexualization of schooling by government and the dominant sexual culture” (Epstein & Johnson, 1998, p. 122). The expectation is also that teacher’s behaviour will be exemplary outside of school. The ‘exemplar’ is meant to reflect the dominant social norms and for teachers who do not fit this inflexible mould (read lesbian teachers); the balances between their professional and personal lives can be emotionally taxing. Epstein and Johnson describe this struggle as a “tightrope without a safety net” and it is homosexual teachers who take the greatest risk in this precarious balancing act. In

terms of this study, it was important to know if teachers viewed certain courses as more difficult to teach and if so, was this exclusive to sex education.

One aspect of schooling which is still taboo is the notion of student sexuality. Historically the student, no matter what the age, has been portrayed as “the innocent” with the desexualized teacher playing the role of “guardian” or “protector”. By adding the factor of student sexuality, the family discourse which stresses the parent-child relationship, is once again violated. Epstein and Johnson cite the landmark case of Jane Brown, a female British teacher who was outed and attacked for being a lesbian and having the gall to refer to the ballet *Romeo and Juliet* as ‘exclusively heterosexual’. Brown, her partner, her friends, and family all suffered the effects of homophobia and intense media scrutiny. Brown’s situation is not isolated and the recent human rights tribunal of Lindsay Willow exemplifies the homophobia that exists in our school system.

Whether it is the social production of national identity, the conservative obsessions around sexuality, or the privileged hierarchy that is modeled by political systems and scandals, what is evident from Epstein and Johnson’s work is that dominant discourses are constructed and reproduced in social institutions, specifically our school systems. These discourses are exclusionary and the diverse, pluralistic nature of society is discouraged.

Methodology

When researching lesbian teachers the significance of their individual experiences must be considered and validated. The design of this research was approached from and informed by a critical feminist theoretical perspective. This research attempts to reveal the meanings of events and phenomena from the perspectives of the participants. This study is a thematic exploration of the lives and experiences of six lesbian teachers in Nova Scotia with focus on the importance of individual voice.

Qualitative Research Methods

In its conception, qualitative research was viewed as any type of research that did not fall under the quantitative research umbrella, but it has since emerged as a set of action-oriented methodologies whose practices achieve change in the world (Mertens, 2005; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Qualitative research represents “an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world” (Mertens, 2005, p. 229) that views complex phenomena holistically, where the impacts of history, context, and the individual are always considered.

For this study, a qualitative approach was the only one that could adequately represent the voices of my participants. Although much improved and welcomed by some researchers, the empirical methods of quantitative data collection have historically marginalized women and minorities and have been rejected by many feminists, racial, and ethnic groups. Mertens (2005) provides a detailed account of feminists’ issues with empirical data collection and quantitative methodologies. Such concerns include but are not limited to, research instruments designed for one gender and used for both, sexist language, gender insensitivity, with race and ethnicity having historically narrow definitions without recognizing the diversities of the groups.

The epistemologies of qualitative research are diverse and varied but within the commonality of approaches are the concepts of flexibility, constructed meanings, and the importance of context. For this study these concepts are imperative, for it is the individual perspective that is considered. With the unique experiences of each participant valued equally, there is no basis for generalizability and objectivity does not exist.

Participant Search and Selection

The selection of participants for this study was purposive and not probability based. Depending on the nature of the target population, it would be impossible (and irresponsible) to have used a probability-based sample that employs any type of randomness. Many lesbian teachers are not open concerning their sexuality and there still exists fear of isolation with respect to coming out. When dealing with a sensitive topic such as sexuality, it was better to have participants choose to be involved.

To acquire participants, I used a snowball sampling method where women volunteered. In April 2009, I contacted a lesbian teacher who was open regarding her sexuality and active in the community. I informed her of the nature of my research and stressed that I would ensure the potential participants confidentiality. I then asked that she pass along my contact information to other women who might be interested in participating in a study examining the lived experiences of lesbian teachers in Nova Scotia. While waiting for responses I contacted two acquaintances of mine who are teachers in the public school system and are involved in same-sex relationships. They embraced the opportunity to contribute their voices to this qualitative research. Within two weeks I had three other women email me and express interest in participating in this study. I responded and provided a detailed description including consent forms and potential interview questions.

When deciding how many participants to include in this study, I concluded that a small sample would best suit the nature of the research. There was no attempt to make generalizations and the women were not selected based on any demographic factors. Thus, with lengthy in-depth interviews and a small sample size I was able to examine the slight nuances of each woman's stories. Although my initial intent was to interview five women, when I contacted the last

potential participant she asked if her partner could also contribute. I happily agreed, thus putting my total number of participants at six. The participants' genuine desire to be included in this study reiterated the importance of the snowball sampling method and the sense of safety conveyed in this approach.

This process of acquiring participants was critical to my theoretical framework. By allowing participants to volunteer they self-identified, removing the need for conceptual definitions (and subsequently operation definitions) which could have potentially pigeon-holed participants' identity. I also chose this method because I believed it to be the safest. The other options would have included sending mass emails or posting ads in teacher newspapers describing my research, but with each of these options I could not be assured that the safety or confidentiality of my potential participants would be maintained.

Interviews as a Data Collection Method

“Feminists' criticisms of quantitative, closed-ended survey research are based on the problem of oversimplifying complex issues by reducing them to a limited number of questions and response options” (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 173). To ensure participants had an opportunity to adequately express themselves I conducted semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions that gave the participants the opening to provide rich, nuanced descriptions of their lived experiences and brought “forth the dimensions [of themes] they found important” (Kvale, 2007, p. 12).

During the month of May, 2009, each of the women participated in semi-structured interviews in their own homes varying in length from 1 hour to 1 hour and 40 minutes. The interviews were then transcribed, with all identifying markers and inaudible utterances removed. The transcripts were then returned to the participants with the instruction that they could remove

or add to any portion of the interview. Four participants approved the transcripts with no changes necessary, while two women clarified a number of points, expanded on several of their previous comments, and suggested modifications or removal of comments that they perceived as identifying.

Although a list of open-ended questions was asked of each of the participants (not necessarily in the same order), planned and unanticipated probes were also used (see appendices D and E). This was especially true when the participants initiated conversations relating to topics that I had not intended to discuss. For example, many interviews included a discussion regarding the prevalence of homophobic language within their schools, all of which were originated by the participants. Overall, I encouraged the women to communicate aspects of their profession that they deemed significant to their lives as lesbian teachers.

Unlike a printed questionnaire or a standardized test that may be used in a quantitative study, in a qualitative study the “researcher is the instrument for collecting data” (Mertens, 2005, p. 247). For my role as a researcher I focused considerable time and interest on understanding my own values, biases, and assumptions; for I too, am a creature of a socially constructed society. As the researcher it was crucial that I reflectively monitor my position of power throughout the research process. Like Sonya Singer (1997), I believe that “a basic tenet of feminist research involves working toward a more egalitarian relationship between the researcher and the ‘researched’, in term[s] of [power]” (p. 9). I actively listened to the participants and their voice is reflected in the interviews.

Ethical Considerations

Participants' rights include the following: (a) the right to be fully informed [regarding] the study's purpose, (b) the right to confidentiality and anonymity, (c) the right to ask questions of the investigator, (d) the right to refuse to participate without any negative ramifications, (e) the right to refuse to answer any questions, and (f) the right to withdraw from the study at any time (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 237).

For the participants of this study all the rights above were maintained with the exception of one: the right to confidentiality and anonymity. Confidentiality and anonymity are two very different things even though the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. "*Confidentially* is an active attempt to remove from the research records any elements that might indicate the subjects' name. In a literal sense, *anonymity* means that the subjects remain nameless" (Berg, 2007, p. 79). Due to the sampling strategy used to obtain participants it was impossible to guarantee anonymity in this study. For example, there is no way to ensure that teachers will not discuss their participation in the study and since teachers shared my contact information and discussed the project, assumptions surrounding involvement may happen. However, I could promise confidentiality. When a woman approached me and expressed interest in participating in this study, she was assured that the rights outlined above by Lyn Richards and Janice Morse would be adhered to.

Like many qualitative research projects, the proposed interview questions had broad categories but the precise nature of the research question was initially fluid; the interview process and the analysis of data evolved throughout the process of this study. The themes have surfaced from the voices of the respondents, whose participation helped to create a more inclusive society, where women can feel free and safe to be themselves.

Phenomenological Approach and Data Analysis Strategies

When examining potential research strategies and deciding which to use, *phenomenology* or “the study of experience” was the most appropriate choice for this work. As William Wiersma and Stephen Jurs (2005) explain,

Phenomenology is the study of phenomena; it stresses the careful descriptions of phenomena from the perspective of those experiencing the phenomena. Essentially, the phenomenological approach is based on the concept that reality consists of the meaning of experiences by those being studied (p. 243).

Phenomenology has its historical roots in early 20th century philosophy. Its founder Edmund Husserl, a mathematician, was interested in explaining the origins of mathematical logic. For Husserl “the goal was essence, not generality” (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1983, p. 50). Although an unlikely source for the fundamentals of a qualitative research process, Husserl quickly realized that to understand mathematics it must be viewed from a transcendental viewpoint where the experiences of the learner are as important as the material. Husserl believed that philosophy should begin by doing away with preconceptions and this serves as a prominent underpinning in current definitions of phenomenology.

The phenomenological approach aligns with the goal of this study to examine a select group of women and place the subjectivity of their experiences at the center of the inquiry. Central to this research is an attempt to understand the way lesbian teachers interpret the world they live in and how they construct knowledge. It was also considered how the holistic nature of the participants’ constructed realities impact their daily lives as educators. The fundamentals of phenomenology and the complexity of the participants ensured that the analysis of data could not

be technical in a quantitative sense; the individuals have unique experiences that are context specific and cannot be reduced to a few variables.

The analysis of all the data was recursive while the findings were “generated and systematically built as successive pieces of data are gathered” (Mertens, 2005, p. 420). Data analysis occurred throughout the data collection process with each interview being reviewed before conducting the next. In reviewing, I considered additional probing questions and incorporated them into subsequent interviews when appropriate. I used the computer based software MaxQDA, a program designed to assist qualitative researchers in data sorting and analysis. This software aided my ability to process many pages of transcripts from long interviews. This program also allowed for easy creation of memos and keeping a detailed chronological record of the research process. It is necessary to point out that the software was a tool and not a research method. Specific analysis of data did not occur simply because the software made it possible.

Once all interviews were conducted, transcribed, and returned to the participants for approval I began by openly coding the data, where I collected each woman’s response to the same question. With this initial sorting of the data and through the use of discourse and conversational analysis, I noticed themes emerging with similar, and sometimes, opposing perspectives. To better recognize and examine these themes I used a more systematic coding approach known as *axial coding* where I intensively coded around each theme. Throughout the process of axial coding, I frequently employed the strategy of *lexical searching* where I searched each interview separately for specific words or phrases. This allowed me to recognize common terminology used by the participants and examine the context in which the women were using

these words. As a result, I was able to study the similarities and/ or differences pertaining to different themes while considering the context of the comments.

Emergent Themes

Throughout the course of each interview I focused intently on the women's words, I guided the conversation only slightly, and for the most part I allowed the participants to discuss whatever they deemed significant to their lives and those of fellow lesbian teachers. As a result complex themes emerged; many of which spoke directly to the women's perceptions of safety within schools, while others were relevant to their constructed realities and sexual identities.

To begin each interview I asked participants to tell me a little about themselves and their process of recognizing their sexual identity. These two questions provided me with an incredible amount of data and although the women had different experiences surrounding their sexuality, themes were common to each participant. The women identified and named their sexualities at different points in their lives but they all commented that this was a progression that required thought and consideration. It is also noteworthy that each woman who participated disclosed that she had relationships with men; the women collectively interpreted these relationships as an integral part of recognizing and labelling her sexual identity. Interestingly, not all the participants chose to label their sexual identity as *lesbian*; in fact some expressed dislike of any label. Yet they all agreed to participate in a study about "lesbian" teachers; perhaps, because of their same-sex relationships, this is how the women think they are labelled or viewed by society.

Multiple themes surfaced when the women discussed the practice of coming out, the first of which was the continuous nature of this event. Resulting from a society steeped in heterosexism, the participants described coming out as something they had to do frequently, thus repeatedly acknowledging their social coding as "sexual other". For these women the coming out

process exists on a continuum of disclosure frequently defined by their level of outness within their school community.

Their degree of outness at work was determined by how safe the women felt. If a participant perceived her work environment as unsafe she did not disclose her sexual identity to her students and typically managed it with colleagues. This management involved the separation of personal and professional lives through a process of censoring and controlling conversations. However, if a lesbian teacher felt supported at work she came out, openly conversing about her sexuality and making no attempt to fracture her identity. This decision to come out was determined by how safe the women felt but they also expressed the potential responsibility they may incur by coming out. Mentioned by several women was the possible task of being what they described as the “go-to person”, where they would have to handle issues of sexuality that arose in their school. Although the women differed in opinion of how their sexuality impacted their choice of profession, they concurred that there is a significant effect on their daily lives as teachers.

The perception of safety was intrinsically linked to the fear that women felt which affected their decision to come out. As previously discussed, these women have legal protection yet they commonly referred to their fear of coming out. This fear was fuelled by the potential of an unfounded accusation from colleagues, parents or students. The nature of these prospective allegations are influenced by the historical pairing of homosexuality and deviancy which manifests as the current societal “lesbian teacher as pedophile”. A teacher’s career and a life can be demolished by any accusation of wrong doing, especially one of a sexual nature. These women fully appreciated that such accusations did not have to be true to cause harm; they only had to be vocalized.

For some participants of this study, the Lindsay Willow incident acted as affirmation for their worst fears. They viewed this incident as a “worst case scenario” and all the women firmly believed that they could find themselves in a similar situation irrespective of their level of openness or their performance as a teacher. The women discussed means of reducing the potential risk but they acknowledged that, independent of sexuality, the threat of accusation is ever present. In addition, the women discussed the overall vulnerability of the teaching profession and vocalized the importance of the Lindsay Willow case in its ability to raise awareness on matters of homophobia. The women also perceived the Lindsay Willow case as somewhat precedent setting, explaining their perceptions that school board actions may be different as a result of this incident and the findings of the Human Rights Commission. The women also expressed the impact that this event had on how they physically interacted with students.

There were common perceptions of what constituted “safety” and they created a multifaceted social construction. The women discussed the importance of context in their definitions of safety, claiming that there were certain subjects, communities, and physical spaces that ranked safer than others. From their personal experiences and stories it was apparent that occurrences of homophobia and heterosexism impacted the women’s perceptions of safety yet they were not totalizing in their definitions. Just because a woman encountered homophobia did not mean that she remained closeted. In fact, how she interpreted such incidents was contingent on the support she received from her school community.

The participants regularly experienced homophobic language in their schools but they perceived the handling of such remarks versus the actual words as consequential to safety. It was in this discussion of homophobic language that many women felt the need to comment on the role of administration. They unanimously agreed that administrators were imperative to the

creation of safe schools, where both LGBTTT teachers and students are protected. The women who participated in this study also considered the lives of all students in their schools and with whom they work, not only those belonging to the LGBTTT community. It was evident that a participant's degree of outness greatly impacted the way they interacted with youth and how they advocated for them.

When asked how schools could be safer places for LGBTTT teachers and youth, several themes arose from the women's suggestions. To start, there was a common call for the implementation of existing policies which were designed to protect the school community and address homophobic language. Also, the participants suggested that the amount of education surrounding human rights and inclusive language must be increased and mandatory for all teachers. They perceived a massive need for education pertaining to diverse families, especially same-sex ones. The need for effective leadership from administration was also reiterated by the women as a critical step in creating inclusive schools that not only recognize but celebrate diverse identities.

Each of the themes mentioned in this section are broad in description and will be deeply explored in the following chapters with specific focus paid to the nuances of the women's words while exploring differing and agreeing positions. Many of the themes appear as subject headings throughout the analysis chapters.

Presenting the Data

When deciding how to present this data I was faced with both methodological and ethical challenges. A sound methodological approach would be to assign each participant a pseudonym, provide the reader with a contextual background for each woman, and attribute comments to specific participants. This process would allow the reader to interpret the comments in context to

the women and consider their stories as a whole. The method of using pseudonyms was my original intent but when I began the interviews I had to reassess this process. After I interviewed my first participant I realized that this approach was not ethically sound. When I met with the first participant, she chose to remain anonymous yet she expressed remorse and angst surrounding this decision. She stated that although she believed that this research was vitally important to lesbian teachers she “could not have her name appear” in a document that would be available on loan at the Mount Saint Vincent University library. She later explained that she was not out to her school community and should she choose to come out, this was not the venue in which to do so.

By presenting the data through the use of pseudonyms, it was my concern that I could not ensure my participants the rights they were promised. In all communication and consent forms, the women were assured that the interview transcripts and the finished thesis would “contain no identifying features” and their “participation in this project [would] be according to [their] wishes; that is, it could be completely anonymous, any or all of [their] comments [could] be attributed to [them], and/or [their] participation acknowledged if so desired”.

By contextually representing the women and attributing their comments there exists a possibility that a profile may be created which could result in my participants being identified or their identity “suspected” by potential readers. The fear of being outted was expressed by several participants when deciding whether to remain anonymous and I question if this apprehension is more complex than having ones’ sexuality exposed. For the participants who are not out, they work daily to preserve this identity, so being outted may be a genuine concern but how does this translate for the participants who are out to their school community? Why do they choose to remain anonymous if there is no fear of being outted? As pure speculation, I suggest that all the

women's fears are as much about their specific comments as about their degree of outness. The participants freely commented on the inadequacies of the education system, their administration, and the school boards for which they work. I have to wonder if they would have been as candid if they chose to have their participation acknowledged.

Several women were incredibly apprehensive regarding the possibility of being recognized. I am not in a position to judge if these fears are founded; I am, however, obligated, both ethically and morally, to fulfill these women's wishes and the addition of pseudonyms and attributing comments would be in direct opposition to the promise I made to "contain no identifying features". After hearing the women's concerns, I must respect and consider not only who will read this thesis, but their intent and the result in doing so.

Consequently, when completing the consent form, the second participant questioned whether the other women involved in the study had chosen to remain anonymous. I responded by saying, "all respondents to date have chosen to remain anonymous". She thanked me for this information and explained that she too had had feelings of trepidation when she first read the consent forms and now felt no guilt in remaining anonymous. She suggested that I share this information with future participants should they ask.

I seized this opportunity with each of the subsequent participants to restate that anonymity was entirely acceptable and it was their experiences and perceptions that were of value: not their names. Ultimately, several remaining participants did inquire whether all women to date had remained anonymous, and like the second, took solace in knowing that disclosure was not expected. Thus, all participants chose to remain anonymous and not have their words accredited to them. The comments and suggestions of the first two women helped to reassure their fellow participants; I thank them for their guidance and truthfulness.

As a result the data is represented in a non-traditional manner where the women's words are not attributed to a specific participant. All transcript excerpts are intertwined and do not appear in the same order as the women were interviewed. Also, in a further attempt to protect the women's identities, the comments presented may not be in the order in which they were discussed during the interview, unless the sequence of comments is pertinent to the context.

Chapter 2

Unique Experiences of Six Lesbian Teachers

When describing the women who participated in this study the decision to exclude participant profiles was twofold. As previously mentioned, the increased risk of identification was a leading factor in this choice. Secondly, it was my concern that by presenting detailed profiles of the women that included personal characteristics such as their age, the number of years they taught, and where they were raised may inadvertently, and incorrectly, suggest that their perceptions are somehow transferrable to other lesbian teachers. To present these women's individual demographics would contradict the methodology and theoretical framework that is fundamental to this research. I am not trying to make general statements that can be translated to any other woman who may fit a similar "profile".

The Research Participants

The six women that I interviewed were all born in Atlantic Canada and are employed as teachers in the public school system in Nova Scotia. The participants range in age from 30 to 48 years old and have between 6 and 24 years of teaching experience. The six participants represent teachers from all three levels of public school in Nova Scotia: elementary, junior high, and high school (or secondary). These schools are located in a variety of settings ranging from extremely rural to incredibly urban. The schools are part of three different school boards. All participants have permanent teaching contracts with their respective school boards.

Five of the participants are involved in a same-sex relationship where they cohabit with their partner; two of the five are married to each other. The remaining participant is presently

single. Prior to coming out, all six participants had relationships with men, one of which resulted in a marriage and another produced a child.

To situate the participants of this study it is imperative to recognize that their “lesbian sexualities can only be understood within the framework of women’s place in society” (Khayatt, 1992, p. 29). Although the participants can be grouped into specific demographic groups as outlined above, their identities and the experiences that shape them are as varied as the women themselves. Before examining the participant’s current interrelationships it is imperative to understand their family structure, their attempts to mask their sexuality, and their coming out processes. For the purpose of the next discussion, it should be noted that all participants are out to their immediate families. The participants’ definition and degree of outness will be later examined.

Social Discourses, Familial Expectations and Self Realizations

Like all youth, young lesbians are influenced by their parents, families, the media in all forms, sometimes religion, power relationships, and the hegemonic norms that shape social discourse. For the research participants, their childhood and adolescence is pivotal to understanding how they fit in the structure of today’s society and their self-identification. Although the central focus of this study is to better understand how lesbian teachers’ perceive safety, it is also about the lives of women who currently identify as non-heterosexual. To appreciate the current experiences of these women, it was pivotal to understand not only how the women identified themselves regarding their sexuality but how they arrived at this naming. When discussing their sexual identity the women vocalized the progressive nature of this process. Only one woman spoke of “always knowing” she was a lesbian, while the other five

viewed the recognition of their sexuality as non-static. Some women spoke of their sexual identity as a realization that made sense or felt right to them.

The women recognized and named their sexual identities at different points in their life. For some participants who recognized their sexuality at an early age, the expectations of heterosexuality were felt. As one participant explains, a same-sex relationship was never an option for her as a young woman:

I knew nobody that was gay. I didn't even know really what the word meant, it never entered my mind. It was "you're a young woman, you're going to grow up, you're going to be educated, you're going to go to school, you're going to get married, you're going to have kids, and that's going to be great"; and so that's exactly what I did. I went through high school, when I got out of high school I went to teacher's college, I got married to a man.

For another woman, who realized her sexuality at a young age, she lived in a home where anything other than heterosexuality was viewed unacceptable and contrary to what was valued:

It was painful and I couldn't talk to my mother, I didn't mention this before but my mother is very Christian; so any of this kind of stuff would be very difficult for her to hear, so I had to sort of shelter it from my family. I was the good honour student, did everything, so my parents really expected a lot from me; and so I had this ensuing pressure upon me all the time to be the best, to be the good kid. I was a good kid; I was a really good kid. I wasn't allowed to be gay, no not at all. It was unthinkable, especially me, I was the perfect daughter.

A parent of one participant struggled with her own biases when her daughter came out:

My mom said, “Well I never would’ve thought, you always wore pink when you were little and I never would’ve thought you would be, and what are other people going to think?” Then she said, “I wouldn’t mind if the neighbour’s daughter was gay, I wouldn’t care it’s just you know what are people going to think?” What’s she’s trying to say is she’s not homophobic but doesn’t want a daughter to be gay.

The point in life at which a woman recognizes and names her sexual identity is central to her experiences. As Linda Wheeldon (1999) explains,

The [lives of youth], similar to most of society, includes issues of prejudice and discrimination. Dominant culture can make it difficult for anyone living differently from what is expected. The rejection and discriminatory behaviour of parents, teachers and friends can cause significant distress to homosexual youth (p. 6).

The process of sexual discovery came at different times for the participants involved in this study. For one participant, the acknowledgement of her sexual identity came in her early thirties after years of passing as a heterosexual:

I probably thought about the fact that I was a lesbian in my mid-twenties and didn’t deal with it until I was probably thirty-one when I met a partner who I was with for ten years. It didn’t even cross my mind until I was twenty-three or twenty-four, didn’t consider it ever, never. In fact, I remember in university I played sports and on two occasions girls on my team kind of came on to me and I was just disgusted by it all. It wasn’t there; I didn’t even consider it as a possibility. I had a boyfriend, but at the same time I adored these girls on my team almost a worship mode because they were really great players. I

think that I was in quite a few relationships with men that were fairly long term, and around my mid-twenties I realized I was quite attracted to women but I didn't see it as being gay. I didn't think that's what it was, I just thought I'd really rather be around women or with a girl friend or with a female. There were a few situations that made me realize that it was highly possible, and then I actually moved to Nova Scotia to live with a guy and once I got there...actually before I even got there...I had an affair with a woman, so that relationship ended but I moved to Nova Scotia anyway. Then I met my former partner who I was with for a long time and as soon as I got together with her I knew it was right and I was out, everybody knew right away.

This participant stated that recognizing her lesbian identity, her embracement of her sexuality and LGBTT culture, was liberating:

I remember when I was first in a relationship, when I first accepted myself, and liked myself...because when you are fighting that off you don't like yourself too much. I went through a rough six seven years trying to not be what I thought I might be. I fought it every which way I could...but then as soon as I knew, I wanted to get on the highest mountain to tell everyone; and I remember being introduced to gay and lesbian literature and seeing different movies and going to different events, I couldn't even believe they existed. I was blown away. It was all so new to me but I embraced it, loved it, and I just wanted other people to feel as free. So I came out with a vengeance... it was just that "all or nothing".

As Khayatt (1992) explains, "to be a lesbian may or may not have entailed a physical involvement with another woman; it is not an act but a state of being" (p. 114).

This process of accepting a lesbian identity is echoed by another participant who also recognized her sexuality as an adult:

I always saw myself as straight up until my thirties. It was not really an issue, I was pretty open-minded about other people and I don't think I made too many judgements. I was connected with the gay community [by] people I had admired and some female mentors. What happened was it got much more intense, those became my only relationships in regards to friendships and that seemed to be the only group of people I was spending most of my time with, and it seemed pretty natural for me. So I don't know if that's where that openness came, but I think because of that exposure it opened a window for me that wasn't that difficult to go through; it seemed pretty natural for me. I didn't have a big struggle about "oh now I think I'm this, I think I'm that". I pretty much went, "I think this probably fits me". I decided to take a trip by myself, which was not something I would do, so I took off and went out west, I headed off to Vancouver...I guess where everybody goes and finds out. By this point I had already come to this realisation that this works for me. I hadn't had an experience and [yet] I felt comfortable. So I went to Vancouver and did the gay pride stuff out there, and I was very comfortable in that scene. It was great, I really loved the freeness...it just seemed fitting for me. It was more liberating that I did it by myself [and] it was good to see that sort of lifestyle, that sort of freeness.

Like the participant above, several women mentioned having adolescent crushes on women or made emotional connections with people of the same sex, yet few acknowledged or recognized it at the time. Since young heterosexual women report feelings of "crushes" on female role models (Khayatt, 1992), these affections are not necessarily tied to future lesbian

experiences and cannot be explicitly linked to any sexual identity. However, for one participant examining such relationships in retrospect made sense when recognizing her lesbian identity:

I know that I had crushes on some of these female teachers but that's all I knew it as. I knew when I was ten that I was going to be a French teacher, I had an incredible role model she was female...I look back now and I can theorize as all these role models were strong older women in my life that I remember wanting to please, please, please!

For one participant, having sexual experiences as a young teen and recognizing her sexual identity were two different matters:

I have to say that until my late twenties I never thought about being [a lesbian] to the extent that it is labelled as such. I remember as a teen in high school I had a few sexual experiences that were very casual with a couple of teen women my age, but it was in party mode; an experimental phase, so I thought at the time. I didn't label it as sexuality. I thought, "oh yeah this is what everyone does, it's just fooling around" and the next day we never discussed it.

Another participant acknowledged her sexuality as an adolescent but continued to date men until she was twenty years old:

I have early memories of being way more comfortable around girls than boys. I would say I kind of questioned my sexuality when I was eleven or twelve, I knew by the time I was fourteen or fifteen, had my first sexual experience or same sex experience when I was sixteen.

For another participant it took someone else to point out her sexuality; something for which she seemed immensely grateful:

I didn't realise that I was gay or I didn't know, but I was thinking that I could be and I was telling myself, "no I'm not...you are just being irrational, and I went out [to a club] one night and a girl said, "are you bisexual?" I said I think we need to talk! So I pulled her over and she said, "you know" and she named this girl, "we're together and I think maybe you are [bisexual] too"; and I said "well I guess I am". So that night at [a local club] I decided I was bisexual. So from then on I realised that I had a crush on her and that's why I wanted to hang out with her all the time.

It is well known that "young lesbians [have] strong emotional needs; most have spent considerable psychological energy during their earlier years in suppressing their feelings" (D'Augelli, 1992, p. 220). This is especially true for one of my participants, who unlike the other five women I interviewed clearly articulated that she always recognized her sexual identity; being a homosexual was something she named at an early age. This awareness and inability to act on her feelings caused great emotional and psychological stress.

I struggled knowing that I was gay and didn't know how to deal with it. I think my whole life I've always realized that I was gay, ever since I can remember. I remember thinking about having a first kiss when I was really young and it was never with a guy, which really scared me. I would always have best friends and I would start to develop a crush on [them] and I knew that I couldn't. When I was in high school I did a lot of things like you know self-flagellating things like taking cigarettes and burning your hands, and I don't know why I did that and it seems so ridiculous, but I think there is something to that.

Kids tell you nowadays it's like this release of pain, and I think that's what I needed at the time. I [also cut myself] as well which was really bizarre, and every time it happened I would sort get this out of body kind of experience where I didn't really realize what I was doing it but at the same time I did.

Like so many LGBTT youth who experience “feelings of low self worth, helplessness, and hopelessness” (Wichman, 2005, p. 5) this participant came dangerously close to ending her life:

I just couldn't deal with it anymore; another crush on one of my really close friends and I was dating a really good looking guy. I dated him and it was so fake, it was so materialistic, and I was really tired of living this really materialistic life where I had to wear the right clothes and date this really good looking guy who I didn't even like. I totally shut down; I was even thinking of suicide. I remember not going to a biology lab class because it was the last period Friday afternoon; and my friend who I had a really big crush on, was my lab partner. I remember sitting and thinking to myself that I didn't want to do this anymore, and it was probably the most devastating desperate thought that I've ever had. I had so many pressures and expectations on me, and being in love and being hurt over and over and over again and not being able to tell people.

The participant went on to explain what happened as a result of this emotional strain and the further trauma she endured:

So over that weekend I just shut down, totally shut down, so my parents were really worried and sent me to a psychiatrist. I shut down so much that I wouldn't respond or talk, and I ended up being taken out of school for all of December, and I remember I ended up going into the psychiatric ward. It was December, it was Christmas time and I

was in this ward with teenagers and adults, and just a weird existence, and I was there for about two or three weeks. They assigned me a psychiatrist and every time I talked to this person I couldn't tell them what was going on, and I'm not sure why I wouldn't open up at that point, but while I was in there, there was a guy who I had gotten close to who started showing me Van Halen. I can't even remember his name...but he was in the room across from mine and he was about my age, and he just looked so vacant and so pained...we developed a really close friendship. I guess it was two weeks into my stay; he ended up cutting his throat with a razor. He's alive I think, but I never saw him again. I remember seeing all the blood and everybody scurrying around his room, and then seeing the blood stains after and I thought "I can't do this anymore; if I'm going to wake up I'm the only person that can wake me up", so I started talking in all my sessions with the psychiatrist but I didn't tell him about me being gay.

At this point in the story I asked the woman what she told the psychiatrist to ensure her release:

I just told him it was probably grade twelve blues or something. I manipulated my way to get out. Sure enough within three or four weeks, I left that place and the only realization I came to, which I thought was life changing, was looking around me and seeing everybody that was so depressed, and saying "I can't do this anymore I can't be depressed anymore"; and so I snapped out of it. I said the only person that's going to change me is me, and I left. I still craved having a relationship with a woman, because that's who I was, but for some reason I wouldn't come out.

It is my contention that coming out is a choice; in this country very few people are actually forced to stay closeted. The last statement of this participant's story is especially

powerful; she says “I **wouldn’t** come out”, not “I **couldn’t** come out”. She believed that her circumstances were not conducive to coming out, perhaps the potential for personal loss was too great, and her experiences exemplify the lengths people go through and the trauma they suffer when attempting to conceal their sexual identity. Yet, with all she had been through she still perceives coming out as a choice. This story is significant for this research. It shows how a lesbian’s sense of self is impacted when she feels the need to hide who she is. For lesbian teachers who choose to deny their sexuality because they feel unsafe, the effect on their emotional health can be momentous. This is not to say that all teachers who are not out are emotionally suffering. Many choose to live their lives in separate spheres and express no desire to change this existence. This however was not the case for the women who participated in this study. Those who were not out to the entire school community explained and justified their reasons for doing so but all expressed a desire to disclose their sexuality and lead what they viewed as a more open life.

This story is also significant because of the participant’s age when it occurred; she was a student in the public school system. She represents the isolation, fear, and emotional anguish commonly experienced by many LGBTTT students. For this participant, although she pulled herself out of a deep depression and reclaimed her life, it still took her four years to disclose her sexuality to friends and family.

Complex Relationships with Men

Patriarchal heterosexuality and androcentric discourses have historically appropriated women’s sexuality in terms of their relationships with men. Women who engage in same-sex relationships have been, and continue to be, positioned as sharp contrasts to the well defined

dominant norm of heterosexuality (Epstein & Johnson, 1998). A woman's identity is far too unique to be defined as a consequence of her sexual relationships. However, many women's journey of recognizing a sexuality identity is often shaped by experiences and relationships that aid in self-actualization; some of them happen to be with men.

Although the participants' experiences are diverse, there are central themes and categories connecting the emotions, perceptions, and consequential effects of these opposite-sex relationships. In terms of their work situation is important to note that many of the participants mentioned working, or having worked for male administrators, thus possibly adding a gender component to power relationships.

For each of the women concerned, their relationships with men and the recognition of their sexualities are fundamentally linked. These relationships often influenced how and when they came out. This is important to this research because it again shows the sometimes progressive and fluid nature of sexuality, but it also underlines the societal expectation of heterosexuality and how these lesbians feel the pressure to meet such hegemonic norms. As previously discussed, these women often viewed their relationships with men as what was expected of them and when they were unable to maintain a heterosexual lifestyle they were left feeling guilty, as if they had somehow failed. One woman was very articulate in retrospectively examining her relationships with men and exploring why she made to the choices she did. As she explains:

I got married to a man, we're friends today he's an incredible man and wonderful person. I loved him as much as I could love a man; but there was no connection, and I couldn't figure out why I couldn't connect, what was wrong with me. I married him and thought "this is going to be it". You know in the church I made these vows for life...and I

believed that when I did it. So it was safer, and then somewhere along the relationship it just fizzled out and I couldn't explain, and the guilt that I felt... "why can't I be with him, I love him he's amazing". I couldn't explain that emotional detachment, disconnected, no desire, and it was kind of like this [a] familial love rather than a partnership. So when I made that promise in the church and couldn't fulfill it, well I just punished myself. The shame, that took me coming to terms with my own sexuality and my own self [to] let go of that guilt. So I got together with a man who had some issues and was very detached from the relationship and I think unconsciously that's what I wanted at that point in time. I chose something that I believed I probably deserved verses a healthy relationship...It's amazing how our subconscious points us in those directions.

For a participant who recognized and named her sexuality at a very young age, engaging in relationships with men was something she consciously did in an effort to "overcome" her sexual identity. Here she expresses her fondness for a male partner as a person but is explicit in her lack of sexual attraction, something she deemed important:

So I moved in with him and it was perfect; he was the perfect person, he was the perfect partner, I never wanted for anything, he had a really good job I was still in school, his parents were great, and they thought it was a match made in heaven. So I kind of let this go on, although I didn't have any sexual feelings for him or anything. That was hard to skip over, that I didn't ever want to be with him.

The difficulty with physical relationships was echoed by another participant who chose partners based on her perception of their sexual appetite:

It's interesting because I was always scared [of younger] men because I just thought the sexual expectation was always too high, so I always went for much older men, thinking stereotypically, that they wouldn't have that high [sexual] drive. Funny, how we can rationalize just about anything if we need to.

As a teenager, one participant dated many young men to hide her sexuality. Similar to the comments of the other participants regarding physical contact, she too was unable to maintain these relationships. As she explains:

To be popular with my friends I would date a lot of boys. It was kind of funny because they used to think I was like a man-eater going through guy after guy after guy, but really it was whenever the guy and I would get to a certain point where it evolved to physical activity I would move on to a next guy, and that's what that was all about, all this masquerading...Then an old boyfriend came around who I went to the prom with, and I ended up getting into a relationship with him and still all the while knowing that I'm gay; I'm gay but how am I going to tell people.

For most of the participants, the process of dating men was an attempt to manage or deny their sexuality. For these women it was evident that they viewed relationships with men as something they felt compelled to try in an effort to normalize their sexuality. This is significant to this research because it substantiates the social pressure that lesbians often feel to conform to dominant hegemonic norms and hide the non-heterosexuality. Again, this is important because it speaks to the impact of hiding on the women's sense of self. In terms of lesbian teachers, they

too may employ such manoeuvres to mask their sexuality at work, thus affecting their overall emotional welfare. As one participant explained, her sexuality had caused nothing but pain so as self-preservation she tried desperately to lead a heterosexual lifestyle:

A really good friend of mine who said, “why don’t you move in with me, I’ve got a condo and I can help and I love [your son]”, and I thought you know, “fuck this I’m going to try to live a straight life”, and I had never experienced a gay relationship but all I knew was that it was bringing me so much pain and I had a child. So I [thought], “you know what, yeah I’m going to try to be with [him] and I’m going to try and love [him] and I’m going to try to be straight, you know other people have done it so why can’t I do it.

Not all the participants viewed their relationships with men as an attempt to hide or “fix” their sexuality. For one participant, time she spent with men was uncomplicated, a way to avoid women to whom she was attracted, thus fighting her sexuality:

In my teen years I quite enjoyed hanging out with the guys drinking beer and playing cards, it seemed easy. I always had this avoidance of young women for some reason. I believe it was probably on some level a sexual attraction but I didn’t feel that, I had no clue.

For those who “try to be straight”, the daily chore of passing as a heterosexual can be emotionally daunting. They are left with a marginalized sense of self in a world that institutionally sanctions and ideologically affirms their masking as heterosexual. If the education system is to become more diverse, it has to be asked: Is this privileging of heterosexuality still existent in today’s schools? And if so, how does this affect LGBTTT teachers’ sense of self and worth? Also, is it possible to encourage or celebrate diversity without tenaciously challenging the

societal norms that attempt to negate and dismiss certain identities? As well, how do these experiences allow them to empathize with students in their classes who might be in the same situations?

Chapter 3

Outness: A Continuum of Disclosure

For the teachers who participated in this study their degree of outness influenced many aspects of their lives, especially the interpersonal relationships within their school communities. These interactions had the potential to create positive work environments where lesbian teachers are supported and encouraged to actively contribute to their school. Regrettably, the possibility of homophobia and isolation also exists. As teachers these women are legally protected but the personal implications of coming out have to be considered and validated. For some women, the private sacrifice of hiding their sexuality may be what they perceive as the only option for the school in which they work.

When a person “comes out” it means that they must declare their sexual identity as something other than the expected, dominant norm of heterosexuality. This process is often a calculated one fraught with fear and apprehension. After coming out to themselves, the participants, like most members of the LGBTTT community, had to carefully strategize how to come out to friends and family; it was never a flippant decision made in haste. As the women reported, this is not something that happens once, in fact, most agreed that coming out is something that must continue to happen if one wishes to have their identity acknowledged. This does not change in the education system. In fact, as a teacher, perpetually coming out is intensified because of the ever changing nature of staff and students.

The coming out process and understanding how women deem it safe to do is central to this research. In each interview I asked the women to describe their coming out process. Interestingly, they all started this discussion with stories relating to their friends and family.

Keeping with the objective of this research to explore what the participants perceived as important, the following passages explore some of their original coming out experiences.

It has been at least 5 years since all the participants disclosed their sexuality to their family and friends. For all the women involved in this study, coming out to friends and family members happened as adults when they had the means and ability to provide for themselves, unlike many LGBTTT youth who often face homelessness when disclosing their sexuality. Yet when each woman described her coming out process it was evident that a myriad of feelings still surrounded these events and the potential for emotional harm was enormous. Some of the women openly discussed how much they loved their family and the fear of rejection surrounding coming out. One woman felt that her parents would eventually accept her sexuality but she still feared telling them and could not actually say the words:

So I went home, [in] the pink dress; I get to my mom's and I couldn't tell her, I was just freaking, just sweating...so I had written a card because I knew that may be a problem for me. I knew it was a process and they need their time. You know I know all that, I'm an educated person, I deal with this stuff but it's a lot different when it's you. Did I ever think my parents weren't going to accept it at some point? No. I knew they would [because] my parents are pretty non-judgemental. So I left my mom a card and I left, and I came home, and two of my other friends our friends were here too and they knew I had done it. So we sat here and waited and I'm thinking "why hasn't my mother called? Oh Jesus!", and I'm freaking out. So finally the phone rang and [my friend] said here take the phone it's your mother; I said hello and my mother was said "we got your card, it's okay, I kind of suspected, I actually thought you were in a relationship with [a friend]".

Another participant also struggled to vocalize her sexuality to her family and herself. Thankfully, as in the previous case, her mother was very in tune with her daughter's emotions and was accepting of her sexuality:

I couldn't say the words. I couldn't say it to myself, "I am gay". I could never say that to my mother. I said "Mum I've got to tell you something", and one thing I knew from day one is I've always had unconditional love and support from my mother. She was my closest friend and advocate. I was sitting there, and I [had] told her everything from day one and I couldn't say "I am gay" to her. She said "What is it? Something has changed, you seem happy, you've left this relationship, but what is it? [You want] to tell me something". She said "you're gay", I said "well that's it". I had underestimated my Mum and her intellect, I just went "wow, when did you think of this"? She said, "Well I haven't really thought about it and I didn't think this", but she just knows me very well, and she said "you know as long as you are happy that's all I care about".

As seen in the responses of the previous two participants, when coming out the apprehension and fear of rejection and internalized homophobia is sometimes worse than the actual response. For many members of the LGBTTT community, through the "process of oppression, they have been implicitly told that their development is abnormal and their prospects for personal and family fulfillment slight" (D'Augelli, 1992, p. 214). For one participant the process of recognizing her sexual identity and coming out was something that she had to come to terms with as much as her family and friends. Two important people in her life responded in an unexpected yet positive manner:

So I got really anxious one night and [my roommate] says “what’s wrong?” Finally I said, “Well I need to tell you something”, and I was saying “guess, you need to guess”. She said, “Well do you have cancer?” I said, “No, it’s worse than that!” So then she was very nervous and then I said, “you know [our friend]”, and she said “yeah”, I said “well it’s about her” and she still couldn’t figure it out. She had no idea what I meant and finally I guess I must’ve said I had a crush on her or something like that. Then she got upset with me [for presenting] it as something so awful and [I scared] her, and she said “that’s nothing”. [So I say], “well I don’t want you to not change in front of me now” and she’s saying “well I’m not going to do that”. So I was the one making the big deal about it and everybody around me seemed to think it was no big deal, so that was comforting you know. It was more my issue than anybody else’s ... So I come home with the decision that I’m bisexual. So I told my sister and I was very nervous to tell her, and she said “oh yeah, I knew that, and so am I!” So I was like “oh that was not so hard”, and she said “I always knew you were anyway. Remember when I was talking to you about all these [women] and why do think I was doing that?” So anyway that was very easy.

A fearful aspect of coming out is trying to predict how loved ones will react to the news. In an attempt to gauge their family’s reactions some participants first came out to someone who they thought may react in a manner similar to their loved ones. One woman discusses her “practice runs”:

The last person I told at work was a [woman] who I really respect. [She is] very conservative, very straight, but I trusted her and I felt I’m going to tell her because I thought it was the closest thing to my mom and that was the day I was going to tell my mom. So I told her and she was great about it...My best friend who’s ultra conservative,

church every Sunday, married with three kids, and I thought I've got to tell her. So I tested out one friend first who has a very similar background, but who is much more exposed through hockey to gay women so I thought I'll test out her and she didn't react too well. She was a little taken back because we had double-dated with guys, and she had just had this vision of me that was totally different so it took her a little time to warm up to the idea.

At different points of the interview five of the six women discussed their initial coming out, some in more detail than others. However, one participant offered a unique perspective; she personally questioned the existence of "the closet" and whether she had actually ever come out:

The first year that I was out in my school our gay straight alliance asked me [to] come speak to the group, and I had to think about it because in order to be out you kind of have to be in a closet of some sort and I'm not sure I was ever in the closet to begin with. So the out process for me, I look back and think okay, five years ago when I began my relationship with someone who I believe to be my soul mate, I was euphoric and proud and I finally...it's like since I was a little girl there's a piece of the puzzle missing...and finally everything was in its place because the universe meant it to be and I was celebrating, and I don't know if I ever hid it. I never had a chance to hide something I was aware of; so I'm not sure if I came out.

The women who participated all stated that their families are now incredibly accepting of their sexuality and choice of partners. However, this state of harmony did not happen immediately. As the participants explained, acceptance is a progression.

One participant was very respectful of her parent's process:

With friends I told right away and siblings I told right away; and I was very gentle with my parents, it was a very slow process because they didn't want to hear it. I didn't want to hurt them. So it was very gradual, but they came to accept and appreciate it. They love [my partner] and they came to the wedding.

This acceptance of process was echoed by another woman:

[My mother] was trying to be more accepting than she was and she's tried her best to overcome, I mean she's divorced and went through her own period of being marginalized from her own family and I think part of that helped her in accepting me; but she came across and wanted me to know that it was okay but I knew inside her head it wasn't okay, she was struggling with it, and would, but she had to go through that on her own.

As seen earlier, the participants were not always able to gauge the family's' response. In fact for one participant, she incorrectly anticipated her sister's reaction but in time they have grown closer:

[Mom] asked me, should she tell my dad and my two sisters, how to deal with family members and stuff like that. So I said "yeah please tell dad and my two sisters", and she said "okay and it's up to you to tell other people, it's really nobody's business". She is trying to say the right things and stuff like that, but anyway she told my dad and my dad was like "yeah whatever" it's just not something he thinks about. One of my sisters, she started crying, she said "that's so great", one of my sisters has the same name as [my partner] and she said "you picked someone with the same name as me!" My youngest sister, who I'm probably the closest with, had a really hard time with it compared to the

rest of them. She thought, “This is different when it’s in your house”, but she has been the one that is always trying to be around us and she is the one always calling me. [I think] we actually have a better relationship now than we did.

As one participant pointed out, coming out not only creates fear of rejection, it also affects the way people view their parents:

[Coming out] was a crucial moment because I love my mother more than anything, and it was the most hurtful thing in the world for me to realize that she wasn’t perfect, and the way she treated me was horrific, just horrific because she couldn’t deal with the fact that I was gay. It took a long time for our relationship to ever be the same, and all the while I loved her more than anything so it was very painful.

All the participants revealed their sexual identity to a welcoming group of friends before disclosing their sexuality to their families. It was evident that this support system was central to the women’s decision to come out. For several, the encouragement they received provided them with the compassion they craved and the courage to be true to themselves. One woman was very empowered by an encouraging group of peers:

I never saw it as a reality for myself; it was just “no I’d never discuss that, that’s not a life that exists [for me]”. It was just never a world until I got into this social support group. I was meeting a group of people in my masters’ classes and we were talking about sexuality. For the first time in my life I was connecting with women and men who had come through their own acceptance of their own sexuality. So I was finally exposed to a group of peers that gave me strength.

Exposure to the lesbian community prior to coming out allowed one participant to openly explore her sexuality:

But when I finally made, I wouldn't want to [say "a decision"]; but when I finally thought maybe this is a possibility. [You know] maybe this is why relationships don't work for me because I'm looking in the wrong places; and because I was hanging out with a group of people who were lesbians, I was open to that and that [culture and community].

Like the previous participant, one woman also expressed how comfortable she felt in the company of supportive lesbian women:

I talked to my older sister about being gay, and she said "you should come [and visit me]", because my sister lived in this house with all these gay women, and they were all friends and it was really cool. So I sort of sought refuge there, and I felt fine; I felt at home.

Although these stories are very personal and specific to the participants, it is important to note the need for support must extend beyond these incidents and into schools to be used to support students, and possibly colleagues, going through similar challenges. When lesbian teachers decide to come out to colleagues and students they face the not only the fear of accusation but also rejection. The last passages highlight the positive impact of support systems. Allies such as these, allow the women an arena where they can be true to themselves and celebrate their identity. To become truly diverse spaces where lesbian teachers can openly work and feel safe, schools must not only be accepting of difference they must encourage it.

Coming Out: An Unremitting Event in the Daily Lives of Lesbians

Although the women and their stories were unique, one aspect of coming out that they all agreed on was the continuous nature of the event. For all the participants, and moreover all members of the LGBTTT community, coming out is a process that happens repeatedly; a repetitive process which stems from the heterosexist presumptions of society. Such presumptions are constructed by patriarchal discourses that maintain and reproduce the ideology of “female as heterosexual”, which lesbians contend with every day. As one participant explained, “I come out all the time. You come out every time you see somebody you haven’t seen for awhile”.

Coming out can be perilous; the possibility for loss is magnificent. Heterosexism preserves that state of threat and forces lesbians to perpetually risk the relationships they hold most dear. This complex process of divulging one’s sexuality often leaves members of the LGBTTT community frustrated and conflicted: frustrated that they are forced to do so and conflicted in the decision to be true to one’s self or uphold the heterosexism that silences them. This frustration was vocalized by one participant:

[Coming out], it’s every day! There are people that are very close to me that don’t know yet and as time goes on I think, “I’ve got to let them know”, but I’m thinking “straight people don’t have to let anyone know anything”. To me I don’t understand why it’s important to let people know; why you have to declare it? But I almost feel I have to declare it. I’m not really sure why though, if that’s something ingrained in me.

For one teacher the never ending process of avowing her sexual identity was not something she considered before she first came out:

One thing surprised me was that I had to keep doing it and had I realised that right away I'm not sure I would have come out so quickly; because the first time I came out I thought great that was easy alright I'm done, and then the first time I met somebody after having had told the entire world I thought, "I haven't told this person because I didn't know this person, here we go again". So I found that really shocking as stupid as it might sound, I was surprised by that. So that was tough and still is sometimes.

The practice of coming out is not only a repetitious occurrence, it is typically a conscious, deliberate event. For the participants, personally divulging their sexuality to anyone never happened by accident. Several participants commented that as a means of disclosing their sexuality, they will often insert the phrase, "my partner", and "she" in a conversation. I asked if this was something that was natural conversationally or premeditated on their part. Here is one participant's response:

Yes I certainly have to think about it. There are people I haven't told that I know have siblings or very close friends who are gay and it's still even hard to tell them because they see you a certain way, and that's my own barrier that's not theirs. That's me putting it on myself; and how are they going to react now I'm not what they knew and so that to me is challenging.

As a result of continuously coming out, the notion of *being out* is often viewed as a continuum. Lesbians, and more specifically lesbian teachers, must decide which spheres of their lives are safe places to reveal their sexuality. When asked if they were out, several participants responded "yes", but went on to qualify and contradict their answer. Most of the qualifications to this question related to their degree of outness at work, an aspect of the women's lives that will

be later examined. However, the response of one participant illustrates the conflict lesbian teachers experience when deciding to come out:

I'm out. I guess that's a relative term. I'm out to my family, I'm out to friends, but I don't make a point of coming out every day. In conversations in the staff room I don't feel safe or think it's a smart thing to do. I would say I'm out in most places.

Outness: A Construction of Meaning

Knowledge is more than a set of defined facts that carry universal truths. Knowledge is a construction uniquely acquired and fluidly defined from the variability of experiences and the perceptions of its subjects. Epistemologies are shaped by social constructs, and for my participants specifically, their ways of knowing are moulded by those in positions of power that serve to maintain the status quo. Khayatt (1992) contends that in order “for the ideology of the dominant group to become ‘hegemonic’, it has to be accepted by people at the level of common sense” (p. 64). When lesbians experience hegemonic ideologies such as heterosexism it constructs knowledge that their identities are not valued and thereby classifies their relationships as subordinate.

This ranking of inferiority is evident in the participant's constructed definition of “being out”. For non-members of the LGBTTT community, being out may be viewed simply as a declaration of sexual identity but for the women I interviewed, to be “out” has a distinct social meaning rooted in dominant discourse. It must be remembered that hegemony “is the process whereby subordinated groups incorporate the hegemonic ideologies of the ruling class, not because they are necessarily coerced into doing so, but because the ruling class is able to shape and win their consent” (Khayatt, 1992, p. 76). This recognition of, and desire to possess,

heterosexual privilege was palpable when I asked women what it meant to be out. As two women explain, they long for inclusion, not for themselves but for their relationship and the women they love:

That my partner would be included as anybody else's partner [who was of the] opposite sex would be included. That the people that meant the most to me knew. That's what it means.

Not to have to second guess whether I can tell somebody or not. So that to me is what being out is; just being able to treat my partner like a heterosexual person would treat their partner, and even in making a reference and not have a fear that this is going to harm me in some way.

When I asked two other women what being out meant to them they used the word "free" in their description of outness:

It means that wherever I am and whoever I'm with I'm free to celebrate my partnership and talk about our life, and I feel no shame or discomfort what so ever.

That I can freely talk about my partner and if I have to make reference about "she" then I can do that without feeling like there is going to be judgement made; or feeling like I could be in harm's way.

Obviously the issue of disclosure is central to the constructed meaning of "outness". However, for these women their personal designation of "outness" is defined in terms of, and in contrast to, the dominant social norms that appropriate their sexuality. For this study's participants, their

epistemology of “being out” is inherently tied to the necessity of safety and the validation of their relationships.

In her research with thirteen gay and lesbian educators Pat Griffin (1992) outlined a spectrum of outness which ranged from being “totally closeted” to “publicly out”, with “implicitly out” and “explicitly out” at the upper (publicly out) end of the spectrum. Griffin uses the term *implicitly out* to describe participants who honestly shared details of their “personal life and intimate relationships without actually labelling one’s self as gay or lesbian” (p. 176). Participants who were implicitly out did not lie about their sexuality and they often allowed others to draw their own conclusions. For the participants of Griffin’s study, this degree of outness was viewed as a necessary blend of honesty and safety. *Explicitly out* refers to participants who “directly [disclosed] their gay or lesbian identities to selected people at school” (p. 178) and was perceived as being the highest risk. To be *publicly out* would mean that the participant is out to the entire school community including students and parents. It is important to point out that of Griffin’s thirteen participants none were publicly out. So as a result, the discussion was predominantly centered on the level of outness with colleagues.

To use Griffin’s terms, of the six women who participated in my research, three were explicitly out. However, in describing their level of outness and workplace relationships it was apparent that there were aspects of their work and life in which they were implicitly out. For Griffin, the terms implicit and explicit were used to define and separate two levels of outness; I have difficulty dividing my participants this way. These three participants not only discussed situations that would be labelled as explicitly and implicitly out but they also related circumstances where they were completely closeted. Their degree of outness was contingent on their perceived safety which had a variety of contributing factors, often contextual and fluid in

nature. Therefore, I propose that these women are *conditionally out*. Griffin's definition of publicly out is appropriate when defining the degree of outness of the remaining three participants. These three women were out to their school communities and made no attempt to manage their sexual identity.

The Unstable Social Relation Known as Identity

When a woman identifies as anything but heterosexual, she names herself as a sexual "other". In choosing to love another woman, lesbians challenge the dominant discourses that define and rank their sexuality as socially subordinate. In the presentation of this research I have consistently used, and will continue to use, the term "lesbian" as a generalizing term for the participants of this study. The use of any definition to categorize sexuality is troublesome for Butler (1990) and Ferfolja (2007). Both contend that any classification is neither tangible nor definable and categories "are the implements of regulatory regimes" while "lesbian identity as a single, definable and universal classification cannot exist" (Ferfolja, 2007, p. 572). However, it is important to point out that this classification is for operational purposes only and for the women who participated in this research their "sexuality is not a discrete domain. It shapes and is shaped by all the surrounding social relations" (Epstein & Johnson, p. 114). Although the term "lesbian" cannot be used to collectively represent all women involved in a same-sex relationship, women do have "the ability to self-define as lesbian, whatever the definition invokes" (Ferfolja, 2007, p. 572).

The word lesbian has historically implied a stigmatized image of women. From an empowered perspective, a "lesbian" rejects a man's possession of her body, contests her prescribed gender role, and forgoes the expectations of heterosexuality. From an oppressive perspective, a "lesbian" is at worst reduced to a sexual act and at best a masculine, lascivious

female who works to corrupt the natural sexual order (Khayatt 1992, Griffin, 1992, Pierce 2001, Garber 1994). The connotation of the word lesbian has transitioned from a term of deviancy and pathology, to a place of political movement where the word is being reclaimed by women who identify as such.

When I described my proposed research to the women who later passed along my contact information to potential participants I consistently used the term “lesbian”. As women expressed interest in participating I sent them a letter of invitation which thanked them “for expressing interest in participating in a qualitative study about the lives, careers, and experiences of lesbian teachers in Nova Scotia”. Although I strived to remove a priori assumptions, I incorrectly assumed that their volunteering was part of the self-identification process. I thought that because the women were eager to participate in a study described as one pertaining to the lives of “lesbian teachers”, they were in fact identifying as “lesbian”.

When I interviewed the six participants only two identified as lesbian. Of the remaining four participants, two identified as “gay” and two as “bisexual”. What was surprising was the response of one participant regarding the contextual aspect of her identity. This is her response to being asked how she identifies:

Yeah I’ve thought about that, I think I’d have to say it depends on the context. If I was talking to a very straight person, who I thought could be homophobic, well I probably wouldn’t come out if I thought they were homophobic, but very conservative people I would not use the word queer, and probably not lesbian. I might say gay.

I followed her response by asking her why she would use the word “gay” and not “lesbian”:

It’s easier to say, it doesn’t seem to have the same stigma, I find “lesbian” hard to say around straight people. I think it separates me from them a little more; it kind of puts me on the outskirts, where as “gay” it’s such a common term now and they seem to be able to accept it a little better. If I was in the queer community, I’d prefer not to call myself anything. I’ll often say my partner’s a woman or I’m in a same sex relationship, instead of calling myself something.

This participant’s words are imperative to this research. She actually vocalizes that for her, to be labelled a lesbian separates her in society and that “it kind of puts [her] on the outskirts”. These comments exemplify the dichotomization of sexuality that positions some lesbian teachers as sexual “others”. They also show how some lesbian teachers not only manage their identity, but how they identify based on context and their perceptions of safety. It is also significant to point how she prefers to forgoes all labels in LGBTT community where she feels safe. She was certainly not the only woman to express her dislike of labels. As one woman expressed, labels are something that she sometimes has to use but her preference would be to avoid them altogether:

If I had to label it now I would call myself gay or lesbian, that’s not an issue unless people ask specifically. I don’t identify myself by a label, most times I try and just [go], “I’m (me), I’m a person”

For the two women who identified as bisexual it was clear that although they were currently in same-sex relationships, they perceived the term “lesbian” to be restrictive:

I'm still attracted to men; it wasn't like, "I don't like men anymore". I would consider myself bisexual if anything.

Who knows what could happen, someday I could end up with a man. I mean I don't foresee it and I don't want that to happen but who knows, so why put a label.

One participant self-identified as lesbian but again seemed confined by the label:

If I **had** to put a label on it, yeah it's the label issue.

The question of identifying was especially difficult for one participant. Being asked to identify exposed her process of self-realization and internal homophobia felt by many people in the LGBTT community:

I hate labels, I really do. I used to hate the word lesbian, I don't have a problem with it anymore, I hated being gay, [yet] I preferred the term gay to anything else.

I proceeded to ask her, "Why did you hate the term lesbian?"

Because it had such a negative connotation with any experience I've had. [Then] you learn to embrace it. You know it's like I learned to embrace women that I thought were obviously gay because they made me uncomfortable, and I realized that it was my issue not theirs and I grew to really admire them. Same with guys that are really effeminate and out there with their gay sexuality, I've learned to respect and admire their courage. I've had quite a transformation. As you look inward and you realize these are your hang-ups not theirs; you [come to] admire people for being true to who they are.

For many women the word "lesbian" still conveys a distasteful undertone steeped in oppression and homophobia. As my participants have illustrated; "modern sexuality is the

product of particular discourses which in turn have produced key social identities” (Epstein and Johnson, 1998, p. 33). This is especially the case for the women who personally reject labels but feel required to provide one. For lesbian teachers, they are often faced with contexts they deem unsafe thus requiring the fracturing of their identities to fit what is expected of them versus how they see themselves.

Identity Management Techniques

Aware of the potential for stigmatization and subjection, lesbians often engage in a lifelong process of information management concerning their sexual identity. The control of information relating to one’s sexual identity is shaped by a variety of factors, which change over time and from situation to situation. As Ferfolja (2007) explains,

The prevailing dominant discourse that normalizes heterosexuality frequently compels lesbians to ‘manage’ their [sexuality] through self-regulation and monitoring. Often this is undertaken to deflect curiosity and detection about their sexuality, and it is frequently perceived necessary for reasons of personal and professional self-preservation (p. 570).

Griffin (1992) identified general protection strategies that gay and lesbian educators employed to manage their sexual identities in situations they perceived as unsafe, several of which were exhibited by my participants. For the women who partook in this study their identity management techniques and protection strategies were different when interacting with staff versus students. The relationships with students will be later examined. The first protection strategy Griffin defined was *regulation*, a process by which participants “regulated how much information about themselves they allowed to be known” (p. 174). This regulatory lifestyle consisted of constant monitoring of factors that may disclose their sexual identity. This

protection strategy was not widely used but for one participant, her choice of clothing was an example of regulation:

In the beginning [of my teaching career], I may have tried to dress more feminine so that maybe students might not catch on or say things.

Another participant regulated her life as a whole:

I'm way more private and I'm still trying to figure out if that's just because I'm more private now, or if it's because I'm still not completely comfortable, I think it's both. I don't want everybody to know everything about my personal life, [a number] of them don't know that I do have a partner.

The most widely used strategy to manage identity was *separation* which Griffin characterizes as “maintaining a strict separation between their personal identity and their professional identity” (p. 174). This debate of personal versus professional will be widely discussed when examining the participant's relationships with students and methods of separation. For one woman, however she separated herself if she felt there was someone who was unsafe:

I'm really good at keeping my personal life out of things, so I almost detach myself and I recognize it's not always being genuine of who I am, but at times it depends on who's sitting around the table.

When participants used what Griffin referred to as *passing* they led others to belief that they were heterosexual. Passing may occur *actively* or *passively*. When a lesbian actively passes she may make up stories or use a fictitious male name and pronouns. The strategy of actively passing was discussed by one of my participants:

I sort of misled people, you know if people would ask me “who’s your husband or who’s your boyfriend”, I would just make up some name as a boy friend. I did that for a lot of years, I was younger though. I was twenty-two I think when I started teaching, so I felt really unsure of what to expect; and then it got to a point where I just didn’t say anything, and it’s only been lately in the past two years, so out of a fifteen year career, it’s been [since] year thirteen that I’ve been telling people.

The crucial difference between the passing strategies is that in the active sense, the woman goes out of her way to emit an air of heterosexuality whereas with the passive strategy lesbians allow people to assume that they are heterosexual. This approach of managing identity is different when compared to what Griffin refers to as *covering*. When someone passes, there is an attempt to lead someone to believe that the person is heterosexual. Conversely, when someone covers they are preventing others from viewing them as non-heterosexual. Most examples of covering involve omissions. In the two examples that follow my participants described what I see as a mix of actively and passively passing:

I’ve still not come out to my teaching partner and we’ve been together [for 9 months]. I took four months away so the total time has not been that long, but I was thinking today actually when he was talking about teaching gay issues to his class, and I was telling him about the Youth Project. I thought “You know what? this man has no idea that my partner is a woman”, because one time I think he said something, he was speaking French, and I knew he meant a male partner and I didn’t correct him, and still to this day he doesn’t know and we teach side by side and we teach the same kids.

The janitor and I chat all the time, it's been two years now that he and I chat and he still thinks I'm with a man. Last Christmas he said something about "you didn't get a diamond" and I said "no" and he said something about "he", "you've got to tell him blah blah blah", and I just said "yeah yeah", and I won't come out to him, I know I won't.

I think there is a common aspect of these examples which classifies them as passing rather than covering. In both examples, someone made use of a male pronoun and the participant did nothing to correct them; this is not an omission and therefore not covering. Although the participants did not actually vocalize that they were heterosexual, they left the assumption unchallenged, thus managing their identity in a way that combines active and passive passing. The experience of one woman clearly meets Griffin's criterion of covering in that she omits her sexuality and relationship status. This also emphasizes the participant's fear that her identity will be exposed:

With staff I've had a few incidents where I've avoided them or I just went, "Are they just trying to bait me?" My principal starts referring to me one day, this wasn't too long ago, "you know like someone in your situation, you don't have the same responsibilities being a single woman", and I felt he knew more and he was just trying to test me; and I said, "yeah whatever".

For the participants of this study who are publicly out, this level of outness was not something that happened immediately or effortlessly. As one participant said, "you often have to go through horrors" before you reach a place of comfort and safety. As Woods and Harbeck (1992) assert, "the heaviest toll [is] the energy required day in and day out to maintain their cover. For some, this [becomes] second nature – a tragedy in itself – but for others it [is] a daily struggle" (p. 161).

Chapter 4

Lesbian Teachers: Walking the Fine Line between Fear and Pride

In the education system, homophobia and the “presumption of heterosexuality contributes to an environment where those who depart from the norm are frequently considered abnormal or deviant” (McKay, p. 373, 2006). For lesbians who choose to become a teacher, an exorbitant amount of time is spent negotiating the limits of coming out, being true to themselves and not upsetting the hegemonic environment in which they work. Within the education system “heterosexuality is normative. It is hegemonic. It is also institutionally sanctioned, ideologically affirmed, and socially encouraged and expected” (Khayatt, 1992, p. 205).

The dichotomization of sexuality often compels lesbians to splinter their lives into public and private realms. In the public realm a lesbian teacher is a representative of the education system, and consequently the nation, where she is expected, if not contracted, to perpetuate the dominant discourses that construct and reproduce a heteronormative society. In the private realm of her life, she is a direct contradiction to the privileged hierarchy of this institution that discourages the pluralistic nature of her identity. The management of this duality is laden with internal conflict and fear of reprisal.

The participants of this research are incredibly fortunate in terms of human rights. They all work in school boards that have Race Relations, Cross Cultural Understanding and Human Rights (RCH) policies that align with the provincial policy, the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act. These policies promise fair equitable treatment in terms of job protection and advancement to all its employees regardless of their sexual orientation. These teachers are also Canadian citizens, therefore protected by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. As lesbian teachers in Nova Scotia who have permanent contracts and teach in the public school system, they are legally protected.

However, for many this legal security is not a reassurance of safety. For lesbian teachers the fear of accusation and scandal trumps the legal security of their human rights.

It is important to restate that the women in this study who are conditionally out, all expressed a desire to have more open, and what they deemed honest, relationships with their students and/or staff. As I talked to women about their level of outness and how it impacts their lives as teachers, several themes emerged in their responses. For the women who are conditionally out they expressed feelings of fear and perceived their schools as unsafe spaces to disclose their sexual identity. The fear they felt was predominantly based on the possibility of scandal and accusation of pedophilia, an allegation embedded in homophobia. They knowingly acknowledged their legal rights but seemed to take little comfort in what should be a sense of security. They adamantly believed that any accusation of such wrongdoing could not only destroy their daily lives as teachers but preclude any future job advancement. Explicitly, they expected that bad things would happen if they were to come out.

The women also discussed their apprehension of probable issues that one participant referred to as “hassles”. The hassle to which she was specifically referring was having a parent potentially remove their child from her class should they find out that she was a lesbian. Although she may be legally protected in incidents such as these, this could cause great disruption in her class, affect how her students interacted with her, and change her overall acceptance in her school community.

This fear of parental interference extended to the curriculum the women taught. There was concern that parents may insist on being informed of any material relating to LGBTTT issues in future classes. This could cause extra work for teachers and have their sexuality or ethics questioned, thus putting them in awkward situations that may result in a parent complaining to

the administration when in fact the topics could be required course outcomes. The women also feared that by being out and teaching any material relating to sexuality or inclusion could be construed as an ulterior motive or an attempt to “convert” students. The women also expressed concern that by coming out they could be asked to speak for all lesbians or be expected to assume a similar role in their school. They referred to this prospective responsibility as “being the go to person”, a role they did not welcome.

The Fear of Scandal and the Accusation of Pedophilia

Scandal is the child of accusation and the threat of accusation can create paralyzing fear; for the accusation does not have to be true, it only has to be vocalized. This fear that is ever present in the minds of so many lesbian teachers creates what Elizabeth Pinel (1999) referred to as *stigma consciousness*. Stigma consciousness “is an individual’s expectation that she or he will experience prejudice and discrimination” and for lesbian teachers, this expectation of intolerance is constructed from a history chocked with homophobia and heterosexism (Lewis et al., 2004, p.48). For the women I interviewed, it was clear that they were high in stigma consciousness and genuinely believed that should they come out they could face major personal and professional consequences. As two participants expressed the possible accusations can come from multiple sources:

You know kids could say things and ruin your career, or teachers could say things. [I] don’t ever feel a hundred percent safe.

[Accusation] is the biggest fear that everybody has whether you’re male or female. If you are somewhere with a student and you’re out of sight with them, people [could] make assumptions about something.

One woman perceived teaching to be a profession where trust is not reciprocated:

You sometimes feel very vulnerable as a teacher, and I think that you put a lot of trust out there.

The women agreed that all teachers are in danger of accusation but it was one participant's perception that her sexuality elevated her level of risk:

I think it could happen to anybody. I think it's more likely to happen if I'm gay.

One participant's increased stigma consciousness extended to her staff and their potential to insult her:

It's only a matter of time. I just know my staff well enough that there are a few, and there are only a few, that will do something that's going to offend me.

Overall, the participant who are publicly out spoke very little of fear; they felt supported in their schools. However, the experience and perspective of one participant was especially powerful. Although she was out with her entire school community, students included, her memories of fear were not easily forgotten. The women who were conditionally out described their fears as possible attacks but she describes hers as the fear of personal rejection. Her compassion for women in these situations was apparent:

There are some situations where teachers are frightened to death to come out. I mean I've got friends that still aren't out and they're my age, they're in their forties, and they still don't talk about their partner in public or in school or with their colleagues, it blows my mind. I know I went through a difficult time in my twenties I couldn't deal with it. So I try to understand that maybe they're just still there and they just have that fear of losing

their job or losing their friends or losing their family, because that's what it was for me. That was my fear. It wasn't about being attack[ed] or anything, it was fear about not being loved or not being welcomed, and losing some sort of status.

As a result of the heterosexist discourses that govern society, sexuality is reduced to the sex act, thus assuring that any controversy involving a lesbian teacher will be viewed as a "sex scandal", the apex of scandal hierarchy. For any person a scandal is multifaceted and the possibilities are endless but for lesbian teachers there is also the immediate fear of being outed, the possible implications for career advancement, or a child being removed from her class. All are forms of abuse, but worst of all is the accusation of pedophilia. For some lesbians "who work with children [they] encounter the heterosexist assumption that they are more likely to be abusers of children" (Epstein & Johnson, 1998, p. 60). It is important to note that although the occurrence of school sex scandals involving female teachers has exponentially increased in the last two decades, the risk to children compared to the press coverage (read scrutiny and sensationalism) is disproportionate (Cavanaugh, 2007) as the majority of these incidents have involved students who claim the relationships to be consensual and victimless in nature.

The role of sexual aggressor is one that contradicts (both currently and historically) the view of females as sexually passive, such that any deviation from the submissive position is viewed as carnal, perverse, or unnatural. This stereotype of "lesbian as pedophile" was something one participant considered when deciding to come out to her best friend:

I was worried to tell my best friend. So I told her, she was awesome about it. We just moved on and it's not been an issue for her. My biggest concern with her was she has three kids, and I'm very close to them, and "how is she going to react?", "is she not going

to let me be a part of those kids lives?” and that has not been the case; they have welcomed [my partner] into their life and their home.

As previously discussed, it is the position of many researchers (Khayatt, 1992; Singer, 1997; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Cavanaugh, 2007) that the public panic surrounding scandals involving female teachers and same-sex transgressions are “less about sex and more about heteronormativity” (Cavanaugh, 2007, p. 166). Central to this concept of panic is the role of women in today’s world, the necessity for heteronormality, and the need to reproduce and protect the patriarchal norms that govern the way we live. It is Cavanaugh’s stance that in addition to the homophobia imposed on the LGBTT community, lesbian teachers are especially vilified because the sexual acts are non procreative and their presence infects the symbolic family of the school, thus “upsetting the heterosexual futurity as well as the binary and compulsory gender identifications that coordinate the heterosexual matrix” (p. 171).

Whatever the reason, the public hysteria and “rush to justice” societal attitude has gravely affected the lives of lesbian educators. This sense of panic surrounding potential sex scandals has created an increased preoccupation with teacher accountability and ethical codes of conduct. Increased scrutiny contributes to the already heightened stigma consciousness of lesbian teachers and teachers in general. At the heart of the fear that lesbian teachers experience is the anticipation of parental response (“parental” is used as an all encompassing term to represent all custodians of children). For three of the women I interviewed the anticipated responses of parents were predominantly negative. Once again, the women’s concerns appear to be rooted in the accusation of pedophilia or that they could somehow use their position of power to convert their students to homosexuality.

Walker (2004) contends that this expected parental response is entrenched in “the homonegativity that stems from a national ideology of heterosexism” and although the myth of homosexual deviancy has been historically disproven, parents will not hear “the redundant declaration that child molestation is statistically committed by straight men” (p. 5). She further points out that schools are a microcosm of a society which is ingrained with oppressive stereotypes that are threatened by any variation from the standard “ideology created by Judeo-Christian doctrines of family and reproduction” (p. 14). In her examination of teacher sex scandals, Cavanaugh (2007) argues that through the social coding as “victim”, the student’s behaviour is negated and their responsibility absolved with the lesbian teacher always coded as the manipulator. Interestingly, the constructed reality of one participant positions the adults in the child’s life as the ones who create prejudice:

I think kids who have negative views of different people, that comes from a place and generally I think it comes from adults, parents or relatives. Kids get that from somewhere. I’ve had kids write about [it in their journals] in PDR, “why there shouldn’t be gay people” and it comes from home. [What does] this kid, that’s twelve, sitting in front of me, know about [being] gay; nothing! She’s probably never in her life known [or] met a gay person because she’s been so sheltered, but she appears to think she knows a lot about it, “you’re a sinner, God says that”, that’s where the writing’s coming from.

The course which the participant refers to is Health/ Personal Development and Relationships (PDR). It is important to note that the specific outcomes of PDR, as outlined by the department of education, clearly promote and require the acceptance and appreciation for diverse sexual orientations. Several participants discussed teaching this course and the difficulties it presented for them as lesbians. When teaching this course, one participant used a strategy to

conceal lesbian identity that Woods and Harbeck (1992) referred to as *self-distancing from issues of homosexuality*. For this participant, this strategy of concealment clearly results from the anticipated accusation of impropriety:

Well one thing I've noticed is teaching PDR I don't do as good of a job, this year I did better, but I have not done as good a job of talking about gay issues as probably straight people do; because I don't want to be the one who the parents can come back and say "you are trying to convert our kids", and you're this and you're that, and because it's standing up for myself. I have a much easier time standing up for other people than myself.

Even with this curriculum as support and justification for discussions of diverse sexualities, this participant still could not conquer her fear of parental outcry. It is not only the teaching of PDR that is affected by this parental apprehension. This stigma consciousness also keeps lesbian teachers from experiencing the daily privileges granted to heterosexual teachers. As one participant explained:

I don't know if I would be open [about] my family like, "Would I put a picture on my desk of me and [my partner]?" I'm not there yet. I would hope to be there but I have to be careful who walks into my office, what if a parent walks in and says, "You no longer see my child".

For lesbian teachers the anticipation of a negative parental response generates anxiety in their daily lives and creates an environment where even a picture has the potential for harm. For one participant, who discussed her internal struggle surrounding the decision to come out, her worst fears were confirmed. Her story substantiates the trepidation felt by lesbian teachers:

This year there was one case where a parent called after I had the Youth Project come speak to our classes. He was very, very upset that his daughter was not told...even though she was...that they were coming in, that no letter was sent home and then he started going on and on about homosexuality and how terrible it was. I'm having a phone conversation with him, I'm alone in my office listening to this, and I have to tell myself be professional. I was telling myself do not take this as a personal attack, and it was almost creepy the way he was saying "how awful it is" and how "we need to protect our children against these people", and "[the students] can't be told that it's okay because what if some of these kids are questioning and then they are told it is okay"...it was really terrible. I was very professional, I said it's part of the curriculum and it's about acceptance..."well I have a problem with that word, acceptance", he said "that's the problem they shouldn't be teaching acceptance". So anyway I went down and I started crying with the principal and the vice-principal, I was on a two hour prep so I knew I could kind of let it go a little bit, whereas if I had had a class coming in I would have kept it together and I would have been fine; but I thought I need to get rid of this and so I went down with my cup of coffee and sat with the vice-principal and the principal and cried. I said it was it so awful and it felt like a personal attack. They were very supportive and then I said okay thanks and went back to class.

After relating this appalling example of homophobia I asked her if she thought that the father maybe suspected her sexuality. Her response demonstrates how the social classification of "homosexuals as deviant" reinforces the fear that lesbian teachers face and the knowledge they construct from incidents of homophobia:

No. If he knew that I was a lesbian I would not be teaching his daughter. I feel strongly about that.

I found her statement significant given that she commented earlier about her administration being supportive. Would they not continue to support her if she came out or does she perceive the parent as all powerful? Whether lesbian teachers view parents as representatives of the dominant norm or simply unknown factors whose response they cannot gauge, what is noticeable is the stressful effect on their lives. It negatively impacts the way they teach and the relationships they build. The tightrope that these women silently walk is perilous.

“I don’t want to be the ‘go to’ person”

In addition to the fear faced by lesbian teachers my participants also discussed another apprehension surrounding being or coming out: tokenism. The term *tokenism* was used by Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) in a discussion pertaining to affirmative action and the gender roles of women in a male-dominated industrial corporation but has since been applied to many marginalized groups. By Kanter’s definition a *token* is a minority whose identity is in opposition to the majority in which they work or exist. In their contradiction to the socially constructed norms of heterosexuality, the role of a woman, and the idealized family, [out] lesbian teachers epitomize the definition of token.

As a result of tokenism, [out] lesbian teachers are often treated as representatives of their diverse community. In their study of LGBTTT social workers, Michael LaSala, David Jenkins, Darrell Wheeler, and Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen, (2008) found that lesbians were often “called upon to be a spokesperson for her group, whether or not this is her area of expertise [and they] becomes invisible when other issues are discussed” (p. 260). This role of spokesperson was

echoed by my participants in what they viewed as being the “go to person”. This concept reflected their colleagues’ perception that they were the most qualified person to answer all questions surrounding sexuality and gender. Within a school, being the “go to person” would not only consume huge amounts of time and involve the lesbian teachers in intense discussions but there is also a very real risk of being outed to students and the school community. One participant compared this to the tokenism often experienced by persons of colour:

One of the issues at work is I don’t want to be the “go to lesbian gay person”. I don’t want that, I don’t want that responsibility; and [my] school is so sheltered. I worry, I see that happen for instance with black youth, like they are the expert, how are they the expert on all black people? I don’t want to be that at [my] school.

The running of a school’s Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) was also another possible responsibility for the lesbian teacher. Two participants vocalized the expectations they have experienced and their desire to have the support of heterosexual teachers:

The problem I have is that I’m the lesbian advocating for this [policy against homophobia] versus other staff members who could or should be doing this. Same with the gay straight alliance, it seems like the gay straight alliance becomes the gay out teachers’ “jump on the band wagon responsibility”. This year I did pull back because of that, so no, I’m not sorry someone else took it on.

I think that straight people need to step it up a little bit, and a lot of people are doing a great job, but I think that it shouldn’t fall on our shoulders to have to always be fighting against homophobia it needs to be everybody doing it, included with the GSA.

In the months leading up to these interviews being conducted, the NSTU held their annual equity conference which focused entirely on the needs and diversity of the LGBTTT community represented in their schools. For the participants, this conference was seen as a very positive step in the fight for equality. In the month following the conference, the NSTU distributed posters, endorsed by Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), to every school and community college campus in the province. These posters were inclusive and contained images of families with same-sex parents and LGBTTT youth. Again, the posters themselves were viewed as nothing but positive by the participants. However, the handling of these posters by well-intentioned colleagues reinforced the role of “go to person”:

The principal brought them right up and started conversing with my friend, who is openly gay in the school with the staff, not with the kids, and wanted her opinion on them. [The principal] is pulling those posters out in front of students sitting right there. [It] just went to show that [the principal] felt very comfortable with it and didn't think it was a big deal; [she] was going to who she thought was the expert on it. My friend was a little uncomfortable because there was a kid in the room, and she doesn't feel completely safe either in that neighbourhood or in that community with certain kids knowing her personal life.

For one participant the events surrounding these posters left her frustrated:

These posters just came out this week from the NSTU from the equity conference; there are four at our school and two are same sex couples that are parents, and then there is one with a boy whose playing soccer and it says something about him being gay and people not knowing. Then there is another one about using the term gay. I walked into the staff

room and I see this one about using the expression “that’s so gay that’s so outdated” or something like that. I thought, “Where did that come from?”, “gee lunch time will be interesting around here”. [On Tuesday] two of the teachers who know came and said, “We’ve got to show you something”, and they pull the posters out and show me them, and they say, “the NSTU wants us to put them up”. So I say, “Well put them up!” This was one of my fears about being the go to person. They ask, “Do you think they are kind of sensational, because there are two women there who have a baby?” I said, “Guess what folks, two women are going to have a baby eventually in this building”. So they say, “no, no. I don’t mean that but you know where, we have younger kids?” I said, “Yeah, we have younger kids but what if we have a primary student that has two moms?” So I said, “I don’t know what the big deal is. I’d put two on the bulletin board near our gym. Where does it say to put them?” They responded, “It says to put them in public places where guests to the building and students and staff can see them.” So I go, “Okay simple put them in the main foyer, and put one on this class window”. They asked, “Well what if they get defaced?” I said, “If they get defaced like any another poster, then we take it down and put a new one up”. They asked, “Should we put one in the staff room?” and I said, “There is already one in there so that solves that problem”. So I come back the next day and two of [the posters] are in the staff room and two of them are down in this hallway by this teachers’ classroom and they are not very visible. I went to take one down and put over the water fountain in the main foyer, and I said, “I thought we discussed that?” She says, “I went to the principal because I wasn’t so sure”. Then why did you even ask me?! I don’t get that, but anyway two of them ended up in the

staffroom. One of them should be in the hall and another teacher said so, and I said, “you fight that battle, I’m not fighting [it].”

When the women vocalize the need for help from heterosexual teachers this is not an attempt to shirk their responsibilities to their community; it is a desire to be supported. If the marginalized are the only people fighting for equality, change is distant. For lesbian teachers the desire to educate is often hampered by tokenism. As LaSala et al. (2008) explains, “perhaps the most egregious problem related to tokenism is that it impedes the free exchange of ideas necessary for the building and transmission of knowledge” (p. 261).

Homophobia and Heterosexism

For lesbian teachers who are struggling with the decision of whether or not to come out at school, experiencing homophobia and heterosexism can reinforce and validate their already heightened sense of being stigmatized. These incidents may not represent the entire school population and there may be caring staff members, who given the chance, would advocate for the rights of lesbian teachers. When a lesbian teacher feels the hatred of a homophobic act she may be less likely to risk coming out, thus further removing the potential for support. One woman I interviewed was out to a selection of colleagues that she considered to be allies but as a result of not feeling completely safe, her sexuality was not common knowledge with the entire staff or administration. Sadly, she recently had to deal with being outed by a fellow staff member:

What happened is [my partner’s] dad passed away and her mom put my name in the obituary, and the secretary caught wind of that and she has said a few things to other staff that didn’t know, and I know that. She tried to say “they read the obituary”. They didn’t read the obituary; I mean who looks through the obituaries? Really I don’t even know

how she even figured it out. One of the staff she start[ed] telling is a good friend of mine, and one of the first few people I had told; so she came to me and said, “I’m going to give you a heads up”, and she said she didn’t know what to say to her. I said, “You tell her that if she has got any questions she can come here and ask me, and I’ll answer her questions and tell her to mind her business”, because she’ll tell parents and all that stuff. I haven’t heard anymore about it, but every once and awhile she make a reference about, “how are your cats?” like she knows me; I just ignore her, I don’t want to get into conversations with her; she’s dangerous. I thought, “I’m going to have to face this”.

Important to this story is the fact that the participant did not have a close relationship with this colleague prior to this event and the secretary’s behaviour was interpreted as homophobic by the participant. She perceived that any attempt by this colleague to connect with her was not genuine and more of a fact finding mission. For the participant it was believed that this person treated her differently because of her sexuality and discussed how she was offended:

The secretary had said to my friend [that], “she was really offended that I didn’t share this with them, how could they be happy for me if they don’t know”, and I’m thinking, “I don’t need them to be happy for me. Do they ask everybody who is in a relationship why didn’t they tell her?” To me she is the last person on the planet that I would share any personal information with, whether it was a man or a woman. There is no doubt that she cut the obituary out.

Some may contend that this person was in fact attempting to reach out to the participant, who because of an elevated stigma consciousness perceived this event as malicious and as a result of constantly hiding, she has become paranoid. An obituary is a public document so the

staff member may have assumed that the participant was okay with her mentioning it. I also ask, is it possible that she was malicious in her discovery of this information? To do so would have been difficult given that the person who died was the father of the woman's partner, meaning they shared no common surname. Perhaps she was simply reading the obituaries and noticed the participant's name which she recognized. Ultimately, the true intentions of this woman cannot be known and what is relevant is how the participant perceived the event. For one participant the homophobia she experienced was not directed at her but at a fellow colleague:

There's stuff that they put on the fridge and I would take it down because like they have crossed a line. They put a figure of him in a dress on the fridge, and just made references in regards to him being gay without saying it. You know he has lots of feminine traits right, and he is very into his body and stuff like that, and so he has been an easy target for people. Teachers have made reference to him being feminine and things like that. So that's been ongoing. They'd be very subtle about some [things] but there are certainly under tones there, and some made not even while he is around. I've come into the staff room and taken things off the fridge that I just thought were hurtful. You know, I wouldn't tell him [what] people [say]. So I see that, I see him being the victim of that, why am I ever going to put myself out there?

Based on the participant's comments surrounding "feminine traits", one can conclude that this teacher is being harassed because he does not fit the societal constraints placed on gender, specifically the expectation of male gender. Undoubtedly, the participant regularly asks herself, "Is it safe to come out?" and this harassment that she sees emphatically answers, "NO".

For this teacher it is not only homophobia that she sees at work; heterosexism also permeates her daily life:

Everything is heterosexual every example is heterosexual, and teachers don't even think about it or they don't even think that there's a possibility of another population out there or something slightly different. You know when you look at kids there are very few families now with a mother and a father, I mean that's becoming the minority. I think a lot of teachers because they are of a [certain] generation, they don't open their minds and hearts to what kids are going through.

After the women told me their stories of homophobia and heterosexism, I asked if what they experienced and witnessed in their schools was subtle or blatant. I was interested in whether they perceived these acts as something that people freely did or something they felt required covertness. Their responses were telling. One woman experienced acts could only be labelled as homophobia:

When I first started teaching I experienced [homophobia] a lot. It was blatant! There were a few teachers on staff that would just make jokes daily about homosexuality and it was purely blatant.

Two participants experienced homophobia that was less obvious:

Usually it's the subtle stuff, we have a teacher at school that likes to make feminine voices, and he is certainly taking a stab at boys being feminine; he's inappropriate, there is no way he does it that's appropriate.

I would say subtle, yeah and often you would find out things that people were fantastic to your face but then you'd find out somehow that someone feels very uncomfortable.

For one participant, homophobia takes both forms but how she perceives it has changed:

I think it's both, but I think it's much more blatant to me now that I'm more aware of it. I've always been aware of it, even when I was young, just that sort of stuff around language and that it's inappropriate and not very kind. It always made me uncomfortable...I fought those battles and argued with people, and confronted people, confronting adults when I was a kid. It affects me different now, it hurts.

After hearing the women's responses to the question, I think any attempt to make the distinction between subtlety and blatancy is irresponsible in the context of this research. It is irrelevant if people feel comfortable making homophobic and heterosexist comments. What matters is how the comments are perceived and interpreted by the listener. It was clear that these remarks, no matter how overt or inconspicuous, were only received with the harm with which they were intended.

Worst Case Scenario: The Impact of the Lindsay Willow Human Rights Tribunal

Some may say that allegations of sexual assault on a student are something which teachers in this day and age have to put up with as a part of professional life. Others may say that being accused of sexually assaulting a student is not something one should be upset about. My view is that the allegation of any criminal offence is very serious, and an allegation that an adult would violate a position of trust and sexually exploit a young person placed in their care is a most serious allegation (Thompson for N.S. Human Rights Commission, 2006, p. 8).

For a teacher, the accusations of sexual exploitation of a student are words that no one can ever take back, with no amount of apologies able to undo the damage inflicted; Lindsay Willow knows the cost of such words. The Lindsay Willow incident and the Human Rights tribunal that followed were significant to this research and after analyzing the interview data several themes emerged. Collectively the women viewed this event as the epitome of homophobia and it served as a public affirmation that bad things happen to good teachers. When I asked one participant if she was familiar with the case she responded, “Yeah, I know about it, that was the worst”. The participants also reported that this occurrence, and the subsequent media coverage that followed, affected how they interacted with their students and colleagues. As well, the women used this event to assess their own risk and the overall liability of the teaching profession.

In general, this was the one area of each interview that required more probing questions. For all other topics, the participants were eager to share their experiences and typically led the conversation. However, when discussing the Willow incident, the participants seemed reluctant to discuss the particulars of the actual event and when they did their responses were noticeably brief in comparison to other narratives.

The lives and experiences of my participants are diverse and no two women answered a question the same way. However, when I asked the women if they thought what happened to Lindsay Willow could happen to them, their responses were overwhelmingly consistent; they all believed that this could happen to them; like her, all lesbian teachers have the potential to be victimized.

For two participants, being a lesbian was again seen to increase the overall risk of accusation:

For any teacher of course they need to be cautious and not put themselves in a situation where they can be accused of something, but I would say it's particularly more risky for a lesbian teacher.

I think it's more likely to happen if I'm gay. I don't think it happens to females as often but because [a teacher is] gay I think it can happen more often.

Two participants extended this possibility to all teachers, no matter what their sexual orientation. When I asked why they felt this way, the women responded that it is "the nature of the profession" and sexual impropriety, "[is] maybe expected or looked for". Although guarded in their exchange, the participants of this study ardently expressed sympathy and compassion for Lindsay Willow, not to mention her strength in the face of discrimination and her conviction in coming forward. Their emotions are perhaps an extension of their ability to empathize, or maybe for them it symbolizes their "worst-case scenario" or the embodiment of their own fears. The women were articulate in describing the personal and professional effect of the Willow incident and the finding of the Human Rights Commission. For most participants the case reiterated the regrettable need to distance themselves from students both physically and emotionally. Being alone with a student was viewed as high risk for one participant:

I was very aware of that even being alone in a room especially with a girl, not so much a boy, but with a girl, having them alone in my car [on a trip]. I'm always very, very cautious... Just knowing that that had happened, like I said earlier, [it] made me very cautious not to put myself in the situation where that could arise.

One woman expressed how this incident made her question her own surroundings and outlook:

It made me question my safety because once again I tend to be optimistic, “the whole world is peaceful and lets’ move along”, but it made me think twice about “if this can happen, could this happen to me?”

The issues of physical space and contact were especially concerning for two participants who as a result of the Lindsay Willow incident monitored how they interacted with students. As one woman explains, this event affected her to a point of considering her proximity to students:

It personally made me a little more careful around students, just maybe concerned what others may think if I was a little too close to a kid or that sort of thing.

For another participant, the act of hugging became much more conscious:

I think if you look at the Lindsay Willow incident that made me take a step back too; because I’ll just hug the world and now I kind of stop. When that incident happened I was kind of coming out with my own sexual orientation in the school, now I’m still kind of hugging everybody but I do think twice with my female students more than I ever did in my life. I think it’s just because I don’t want them to get the wrong idea.

The details of the Lindsay Willow case undoubtedly caused the women to question their safety but they were comforted to know that this case set a precedent that could protect them. Although this event personified the women’s greatest fears they found strength in Willow’s journey and were grateful that she had the tenacity to fight a battle that made their lives and careers safer.

One woman discussed their reassurance in the findings of the Human Rights Commission and the effect it will have on school boards:

When she did win, I guess you'd call it a win, when she did I felt safer in that the school, the NSTU, and the school board have to follow procedure and it's put in place to protect me. So I felt safer afterwards for sure.

This sentiment was echoed by another participant:

Part of me thinks that the board is going to take a serious look at being so easy to charge a teacher or to implicate a teacher I should say. I have two feelings about this, one that I could be a target right away because of my sexuality, or two, I think that they are going to be very careful with who they implicate, which I think a lesson was learned there, I really do. I think it made a huge difference.

For one participant the Lindsay Willow event influenced how she dealt with a colleague who made accusations that she was "too close to her students":

[The Lindsay Willow incident] scared me for awhile, and it doesn't really affect me anymore; although when this thing came up this year with this one teacher saying [that] I'm, "really close to my students", I did go to administration [right away].

When I asked her if what happened to Lindsay Willow affected that response she replied:

Yes and no, I think it did instil a response in me right away, because I certainly could imagine that happening to me and so it is something that I looked at but I don't think I've been conscious of it on a daily basis. When this thing came out, when this teacher said

this thing, it did send alarm bells to me about the Lindsay Willow incident, and so yes [it did affect me].

Important to this participant's experience is the fact that she was out to her administration and they were very supportive. As previously mentioned, every participant felt that they too could be the victimized by accusations but one woman made the important point that she felt some assurance that she could probably gauge the response of her administration:

It made me take a step back for that period of time. I did have a little more fear about potential homophobia, and with the media coverage. Yes I believe it could happen to anybody; but again I do think it comes back to where's the support system. If there's an issue that I'm taken to task on, I can predict what my administration is going to do and how they're going to report that because we are close we work together as a team everyday; so in that situation I could say I don't think that could ever happen, but I'm not naive either.

I cannot speculate as to why the women I interviewed were more reserved when discussing Lindsay Willow and the human rights tribunal. What was apparent was the impact that this event had on their lives. For some it brought security, for others it validated the potential for harm, and for most it amplified how they monitored themselves and their peers.

The Decision to Come Out: A Risk Assessment

When struggling with the decision to conditionally or publicly come out, a lesbian teacher assesses the risk of accusation, the potential for homophobia, and the possibility of support. The conjectures she makes about her school community, her colleagues, her subject area, and her physical interactions with students all mesh together to determine whether it is safe

to come out. The women I interviewed conducted a risk assessment of their lives and used the results to impel or impede the coming out process. Typically these assessments helped the women to recognize and define how they ranked in their professional and interpersonal relationships.

Of the six women I interviewed, several identified the area in which their school was located as a marker of risk. More specifically, the location of the school carried with it a constructed view of the community, culture, and possible parental reaction to their coming out. One woman viewed a Christian, “white” community as a potentially unwelcoming place to come out:

[They are] very Christian in their beliefs, for the majority of the people there and very vocal about that. It’s pretty white for the most part.

For one woman, although her family members lived in the same community in which she taught, she still perceived the citizens to be narrow minded:

If I were asked that direct question by staff, but with kids I don’t feel comfortable because I’m teaching in a community that goes from extremely red neck to moderately liberal...I know there are some parents in the community that know, they know me and I have family in that community too, so I don’t assume it’s a big deep dark secret, but I also assume that I need to be careful about who knows and how open I am around them. There are some pretty extreme views on it in that community.

The celebration of diversity, or lack thereof, was an indicator of risk for one woman:

I’m in a pretty middle upper class school. There’s still a lot of difference in there but you wouldn’t know it; it certainly doesn’t get celebrated.

For these women who identify with a diverse population, there was a common perception that the communities in which they taught did not embrace or encourage diversity, thus accentuating their feelings of otherness. Sadly, even positive perceptions can be incorrect. When one participant was teaching PDR in a very affluent school and neighbourhood she invited a local LGBTT advocacy group to speak to her students. She describes how she wrongly assumed that because this was a higher socioeconomic class the students would be welcoming:

I actually brought the Gay and Lesbian Youth Project to the school. That was interesting, that was not too long before I left there. It was interesting, I was surprised. That culture tends to be very tolerant a lot of times. That group that I [had] them to talk to that year, some of them were terrible and I was embarrassed. It really embarrassed me! It was interesting though because I made assumptions that were obviously incorrect.

When a lesbian teacher is attempting to come out, a potential for risk can be the grade level of her school. Similar to Janna M. Jackson's (2006) participants, the women involved in this study viewed the high school as less of a risk when coming out compared to elementary or junior high school. One participant felt that older students were more capable of making their own decisions:

I think that even though they have all the baggage from their parents and older people, [teenagers] can still make their own decisions.

Another woman felt that these students would be more open:

Yeah, and I think people in high school may be a little bit more open to it, but I don't work in a high school; but the people I know that are gay teachers that are out with their students are all high school teachers, and most of them are female I don't know too many males that are out.

However, there was a common viewpoint that if the negative perception of homophobia is to change, it must begin with younger children:

I think it normalizes it, the younger kids knowing, but I think the reality is that high school kids are the kids that I would probably be most comfortable being out with. I think that even though they have all the baggage from their parents and older people they can still make their own decisions, and some of them are making decisions around those issues, around their own sexuality.

Whether it is a result of the Lindsay Willow case or their personal experiences in schools, the participants elevated the position of physical education (PE) teacher to the highest level of risk. When I asked one woman if she thought what happened to Lindsay Willow could happen to her she simply responded that it was “less likely because I don’t teach Phys Ed”. When I asked another teacher if the risk of accusation was increased when teaching certain subjects, she replied:

Teaching Phys ED I think. When you’re going in and out of the locker room I think you are putting yourself at risk, well you have to be a risk because that’s part of your job. So I think subject certainly does affect that.

Through traditional gender roles that equate athletics with masculinity, female PE teachers have historically been assumed to be homosexual (Woods & Harbeck, 1992; Sykes, 2004). In addition, the daily nature of the teaching profession puts educators in roles that elevate the amount of physical contact with students and thus, increase the chance of accusation. As Woods and Harbeck explain,

The lesbian physical educator is, however, the most vulnerable target of all. Not only does she teach in the firmly entrenched male domain of sport, but her professional responsibilities require her to supervise locker rooms where girls are changing clothes and to touch students in the course of instructing the techniques of a particular physical skill. After school, she often spends many hours coaching an all female team where teamwork and togetherness are stressed (1992, p. 142).

In an attempt to protect themselves from accusation and homophobia the participants tend to employ what I label *safety strategies*. These safety strategies include the identity management strategies but are particular to context, areas of the school that are unsafe and physical contact, of any sort, with students. Two participants specifically commented on the danger of enclosed spaces:

I don't tend to go in locker rooms or I try to stay away from them, less so now. When I first started teaching I never went into the bathrooms, and that's probably because Lindsay Willow's trial was going on.

There [are] not many times that I'm alone with a child, and I'm never in the locker room, I'm never out of sight, one wall is all windows. So if somebody was going to accuse me of something it would be a very slim chance that they'd be able to do that.

The teachers were adamant in their opinion of teaching PE but the other course that participants struggled to safely teach was PDR. Sex and sexuality are specific curriculum outcomes for this course which suggests that the participants may be more likely to have their sexuality questioned. In her study of nine gay and lesbian educators, Jackson (2006) proposed that teaching a course such as health (or PDR as it is labeled in Nova Scotia), could present some

teachers with the opportunity to disclose their sexuality but for others, who were not publicly out, it could increase their fear of exposure. One participant considered this situation and prepared a response if questioned about her sexuality:

I know kids question [my sexuality] and if they think I am, and if I were teaching a PDR class on sexuality and it came up I would say, “What would it matter whether I’m seeing a man or a woman”, we could have a great conversation around it. Not about my life, but about why should it matter regardless.

If the risk for a PE teacher is high, it is astronomical for a coach. Like PE teachers, for coaches physical contact is a valid part of their job but their risk factors are increased in the sense that they often spend more time with students outside of school and on field trips. One woman I interviewed had, prior to an injury, spent considerable time coaching sports in and out of school. She viewed it as one of the most rewarding parts of her life. When she described her love of coaching, her compassion for her students and passion for coaching were unmistakable:

I spent almost as much time coaching as I did teaching, and coaching was a year round thing. It wasn’t for a month here or a month there it was very intense. So I worked with kids for years and years. I coached a lot of them for five and six years. So some of them I coached for so long, I almost felt like a parent. I got to know their parents quite well and was very fortunate to have very, very good relationships with them.

She spoke of her interactions with students early in her coming out process:

Before I moved here I was very close to the girls that I coached but as soon as I was out the students that I was drawn to were my boys. They’d come into my office and they’d be all over the floor instead of all the girls hanging out there, it was very strange. I don’t

know if it was a different energy or the boys just felt comfortable or maybe the girls didn't feel comfortable because I was a lesbian. I don't know, but suddenly it was the boys that hung out a lot. Maybe I welcomed them more than the females; yeah that's probably what I did.

I think it is important to point out that although this woman was in an incredibly risky position she is publicly out. Her sexuality was known to the children she coached and their parents. Although she was open about her sexuality and very well received in her community, she was not naive about the risk:

I think as a coach, you know it is a weird situation to be coaching females. I think it's really healthy if you are a female coach to have a male assistant or a straight assistant, it's nice to have some balance there; but it is awkward some times for everyone involved, it's like a [straight] male coaching a female team and going into their change room and having a chat. So you have to respect that and also respect other peoples' perspectives because everyone sees things in a different light, so it's just keeping everything clear and open and out there.

Each of the women I interviewed discussed the issue of physical contact, and, more specifically, hugging their students. Overall the participants agreed that this was a risky behaviour but interestingly no one said that they refused to hug a student if they felt that the student was distraught. There was a general consensus that their sexuality made them more conscious when hugging a student. After recognizing her sexuality, one woman reassessed physical contact with students:

I'm a very affectionate person and before becoming aware of being gay I wouldn't have thought twice of hugging any kid of any gender, and now I'm more aware of that.

Another participant did not enter areas of the school that she deemed risky:

Oh yeah. I didn't go into the girls changing room I just always sent someone in. Yeah I did that and my office, if ever there was a student in there, the door was open. I'm pretty touchy feely, so even that part changed and kids sometimes need a hug and sometimes I still [do], but you are just very conscious of that part.

Hugging a certain way was perceived as safer by one woman:

Little kids I'll sometimes pat them on the head and they are always giving me hugs and I try to give side hugs; there is certain ways you give kids hugs and that's just for your own protection.

One participant, who is publicly out, was resolute in her position that physical contact is often something that students need:

It's funny when we did the extracurricular awards last night I was making speeches about all the students, and I hugged them and kissed them on the cheek; and it was funny because one of the teachers here who was at junior high said to me after I finished my speech she said "that was so nice to finally see a high school teacher sharing that physical emotion", she said "I'm so use to doing that for junior high but I've never seen high school teachers do that" and so she said "wow that was really neat", and I didn't think twice about it. I'm just like that. My [teacher] award this year was "greatest hugs" so there you go. I'm sorry, if you want to hug a student, hug a student! It's not like I'm

going to go hug random students [but] if they need it, I have no qualms about stuff like that, and it will be a sad day if somebody tells me that that can't happen. Especially when you see a child that needs it and you can't do that.

I think the point that this teacher makes is a powerful one; it will be a sad day when as an educator you cannot console student. As she notes, she is not "hugging random kids" or in a way that violates or changes the power relationship between teacher and student. When the school climate becomes highly sensitive to physical contact, the stigma consciousness of all teachers, regardless of sex or sexuality, escalates to a toxic level while precious time and energy are spent speculating instead of building healthy relationships where lesbian teachers and students both loose.

Chapter 5

Lesbian Teachers, Students, and the Wide Chasm of Coming Out

Coming out can take just a moment, but being out – in a way that empowers lesbian and gay students and asserts to the straight ones the everyday actuality of lesbian existence – requires revisiting the revelation. Being out takes practice and intelligence. And like teaching, being out is work that must be rethought, revised, reconsidered (Adams & Emery, 1994, p. 33).

When I began this research process, I anticipated that due to the vast diversity of the LGBTTT community, the women involved would position their degree of outness along a continuum personally constructed from knowledge, experience and perception. At no time was this study ever meant to be, or could ever be, comparative in nature or representative of all lesbian teachers in Nova Scotia. However, the women's personal definitions of outness allowed me to use the operational definitions of conditionally and publicly out. Critical to each of the participants' meaning and classification of outness were the relationships between teacher and student. As previously discussed the three women who are conditionally out have not disclosed their sexual identity to their students, whereas the women who are publicly out openly acknowledge their sexual orientation to the students they teach and with whom they interact.

Consequently, the relationships between teacher and students are divided into two distinct spheres defined by the participant's disclosure of their sexual identity. This division was present in most conversations where the women described how they interacted with their students. Overall, the women who were conditionally out maintained a "professional" separated approach to dealing with their students, whereas the women who were publicly out chose to not fracture

their sexual identity from their job as educator. This dichotomization, or lack of, significantly affected the women's constructed views of the ideal role model, their reactions to students who chose to come out to them, and how they advocated for LGBTT youth. It was here that the women initiated conversations about the pervasive use of homophobia language within schools and how they responded to such verbal abuse. In addition, the women also discussed their need for positive role models at the school and board level.

The relationships between lesbian teachers and their students are multifaceted. From the position of educator, teachers are responsible for (among other things) the delivery of curriculum, the maintenance of harmony in their classrooms, while understanding and respecting their role in complex power relationships. For too many lesbian teachers, the internal struggle of coming out to students is a battle between fear and pride. Do you come out and assume the responsibility of role model for the young members of the LGBTT community that have been without teachers leaders? Do you role model for heterosexual students that you are a "regular" member of society? Or do you stay hidden, trying to protect yourself from homophobia or the potentially disastrous accusation of pedophilia from parents? These are just some of the questions that lesbian teachers ask themselves and angst over. In this chapter, the above-mentioned themes will be discussed while examining the arduous decision of coming out to students, the participants' views of role modeling, and the effects of lesbian sexuality on the student teacher relationship.

Separation of Identities

For some lesbian teachers the dichotomization of a life into public and private spheres creates guarded relationships centered in fear, with identity being contextually dependent. When a lesbian teacher is not publicly out she manages her sexual identity in daily life; this

management is no more prevalent than in her relationships with students. For the women involved in this study that are conditionally out, the technique of separation as defined by Griffin was chiefly employed when interacting and talking with students. For the most part, the women viewed verbal exchanges as aspects of their daily life that required monitoring and control. They often described situations where they blatantly directed conversations away from issues of sexuality and what they deemed their “personal life”. It was obvious that this management of their sexuality requires a copious amount of energy and thought:

If there are kids around I won't talk about anything personal, I won't even say “my house” or “I mowed my lawn”, because as soon as you say something like that they'll say “where do you live”, “who do you live with” and I know those questions are going to come so I avoid all conversations like that.

Another woman agreed with this sentiment regarding not being able to discuss personal matters and noted:

The kids all noticed I wore a ring this year, which was hilarious, “Are you getting married?” I said “No, are you?” They [asked] questions, and I said, “Stop I told you we're not going to talk about my personal life, it was a present that's the end of it”, and we left [it] at that.

Any amalgamation of personal and professional lives was perceived as risky by one participant, while another explicitly explained why this did not happen for her:

Sometimes I realize when I joke with the kids and I let my guard down, then it becomes too familiar and they're just testing me.

In [my work] there is not a lot of exposure of myself to them, because I'm not going there.

For one woman, teaching the course PDR was an exemplification of how she separated her life from her students. This example again reinforces the perceived risk associated with this specific course:

I've taught a lot of PDR, a ton of PDR over the years, and basically said, "What we're going to learn today is I want to know about your personal stuff and I'm not going to share mine".

This participant was immovable in her position that students not know any aspect of her personal life; a right she is absolutely entitled to. However, many educational researchers (DeJean, 2007; Donahue, 2007; Gregory, 2004) would question the effectiveness of this teaching style and the overall principles of this approach. This method of separating one's identity not only impacts the lesbian teacher but the message she sends to her students. If the teacher's sexual identity is suspected by students or has been previously questioned, addressing this topic in such a manner can cause students to perceive her sexuality as taboo or something for which she feels shame. One also has to ask, is it ethical for teachers to require students to disclose personal information and not reciprocate?

It is important to note that in several of the quotes the women used their position of power to control or steer the conversation. I find this interesting given that these women are often ranked as subordinate within society yet they exert their standing as teacher to quiet the questions posed by students. The words of one participant highlights the emotional turmoil

lesbians face when they hide their sexuality. This woman is very articulate in her description of her relationships with students. Her remorse and angst are palpable:

I don't chit chat with them the ways a lot of other people do because I'm always guarded. I'm always afraid the questions will come up, and so there are things I would like to share with them but I don't, so I feel it separates me from them. Which maybe it just keeps it more professional, which is fine, but sometimes you like to kind of chit chat with them outside of teaching. Yeah I feel that I'm not myself, I don't feel as relaxed, I feel like I'm always aware of what I'm saying.

The previous participant was not the only woman to comment on being “professional”, or dare I say, the institution of professionalism. Two other women also spoke of this ideology:

One on one if the opportunity came up I would disclose that I was gay, but only if it came up, it would have to be appropriate, it would have to be professional, but I would.

I don't like to talk about my personal life with [some] people. First of all I wouldn't do it with my [students]; I just don't think it's professional.

So what does it mean to be professional and why have these women equated professionalism with the invisibility of their identities? From a positive perspective, to be professional “is to be legitimated, to be paid for the work we do, and to [appear] polished” (Chinn, 1994, p. 246) while positively representing the institution to which we belong. If this is the case, why is a publicly out lesbian teacher not professional? The notion of professionalism extends beyond the practices of presenting oneself with poise, wearing the right clothes, and behaving in a manner beyond reproach; it is the preferred method of reproducing hegemonic norms that, as shown by my participants, serves to silence individual lesbian voices.

For these women, the ideology of professionalism exists in an academic institution that discretely defines the ground rules of whose voice is valued or dismissed, which work is rewarded or discarded, and whose identity is celebrated or subjugated. To be professional is a declaration that one accepts the ethos of the institution in which they work. For lesbian teachers who are at all closeted, they are in fact rewarded for their invisibility. This compensation comes in being viewed as not upsetting the delicate power balance of the education system. As long as no declaration of “lesbian teacher” has been made and deniability is feasible, their social status and ranking improves. Chinn (1994) contends that “to be professional is to be manipulated” (p. 246); this manipulation is present in a participant’s recollection of a homophobic incident previously discussed where a parent complains about a presentation provided by a local LGBTTT advocacy group. As she said:

I was very professional, I said, “its’ part of the curriculum and it’s about acceptance”, “well I have a problem with that word”, he said “acceptance and that’s the problem they shouldn’t be teaching acceptance”... I’m having a phone conversation with him, I’m alone in my office listening to this, and I have to tell myself to be professional. I was telling myself, “do not take this as a personal attack”.

The participant initially reiterates that her actions are representative of the curriculum designed by her institution. The inclusion of acceptance and diversity in a curriculum is obviously positive, that is not being questioned. It is her statement of this fact that is important, for it conveys the message that this is not her decision or stance but that of the school board for whom she works, thereby absolving her of any responsibility and illustrating how she is representing the agency of the institution.

It is the second half of her statement that I find most troubling. Her definition of professionalism allows, or even requires, that she separate her identity to a point where she wills herself to not view this as a personal attack. No, this parent may not know that she is a lesbian, but in his hate filled tirade where he bashes the LGBTT community, as a member of this group, he is in principle bashing her. Yet she rationalizes this attack as not being personal, thus further fracturing her lesbian identity. These negotiations and reproductions of professionalism “are not innocent or unpredictable; they echo the calibrations of power, resistance, and absorption that vibrate throughout academia” (Chinn, 1994, p. 244). The women of this study spoke of professionalism as what was expected of them and how it was appropriate in their daily lives as educators. They also used it as a mechanism to separate themselves, validate their decision to remain partially closeted, and justify the control of conversations with students.

Role Models: An Idealized Construction

Coming out is not a discrete event, it is a continuous process that lesbian teachers must negotiate. In no relationship is this negotiation more deliberate than in dealings with students. The purpose and value of teachers coming out to students has been long debated by researchers and teachers (Khayatt, 1992, 1997; Pollack, 1992; Melillo, 2003; DeJean, 2007). The common discussion surrounding coming out to students typically centers on the need for role models for youth, both LGBTT and heterosexual, and a teacher’s ability to fulfill this responsibility. In addition, the value of coming out is often queried; for example, if a teacher comes out are they a good role model, and if so, to whom? What is the pedagogical importance of coming out? And, does coming out to students actually disrupt the dominance of heterosexuality?

Before examining these commonly posed questions in terms of my participants it is critical to first ask a question: What is a *role model* and can a lesbian teacher be one?

Traditionally the term role model has positive connotations; it invokes images of leaders whose behaviour is modelled, those who contribute to their community, and whose behaviour and morals are socially acceptable. In defining a role model and asking if a lesbian teacher can in fact be one, it is Khayatt's opinion that this is impossible "since one cannot decide to be a role model for anyone" (1997, p. 135) in that role models are created and identified by those who need them not by the individuals who want to be one. So why do so many people speak of "being a role model"? What attributes does this socially constructed persona possess? When speaking with lesbian teachers I asked them a series of questions surrounding role modeling including whether they considered themselves a positive role model and what made them so. Their definitions were personal and varied but they all had a distinct view of what constituted a "good" role model.

When I asked one woman what made her a good role model, she responded:

I'm a big advocate for being accountable and for being fair.

Removing sexuality from the role model definition was vocalized by another participant who is conditionally out:

Oh yeah I am certainly a role model for my students, not because of my sexuality. For my students it's not a question but I'm still a role model when I hear kids make inappropriate comments, I correct them on that and I take a stance on that, and I think that I can be a role model without disclosing anything about myself.

In contrast, a participant who is publicly out perceives her position in the community and her teaching accomplishments as central to her definition of a role model:

I just think by being a positive member of the community says a lot, and I think that's why kids feel so safe in talking to me. Plus I'm a successful teacher so I think that in itself is a very positive role model for students, and they see that; they're not stupid they see that right away.

One participant equates role modelling with leadership that promotes change:

Attributes of a role model, well I think of optimism, I think good leadership, I think following through on what you're saying, and I think that reflecting what students need is important. I think encouraging change is important and taking risks for the betterment of everybody is probably a big one.

Role models are not defined by their sexuality. Virtues such as accountability, fairness, and commitment to your convictions are what the participants of this study perceived to be traits of a good role model. However, it was evident that they also viewed honesty as a fundamental quality in their constructed image of an ideal role model. The women perceived management of sexuality as untruthful, thus contradicting the qualities of a positive role model. This was the sentiment of a participant who has organized Gay Straight Alliance's in her school but has yet to come out to her students:

If that came out [and] I'm running a GSA and that I've lied about having a same sex relationship then I feel it could be disappointing and it could be poor role modelling. It is not important when I'm teaching math and science and we're not talking about it. So

generally it's not important but if the topic comes up and I'm supposed to be a role model than I think it's important to disclose.

Unlike the previous participant who negates her sexuality when teaching certain courses, another woman could not fracture her life as an educator in this manner:

I was working with gay and lesbian teens and I hadn't yet dealt with my own feelings. In truth I felt very hypocritical sitting there and having the power, because it is a position [where] they are externalizing their inner most stuff [to me] and I couldn't be comfortable in my own skin and I'm telling them it's okay to be who they are. That was a critical time in my profession where I had to say either "get out or get real", for me. To become a positive role model I had to be able to walk the talk, and that was a hard journey but well worth it in the end.

The notion of pride surfaced for the three women who are publicly out when asked why they considered themselves good role models. Here are some of their responses:

I'm very open, I'm very, I guess the word is jovial, I'm proud!

Because I'm proud of who I am. I'm happy with who I am, I'm not ashamed that I love a woman or that I'm in a female/female relationship; and I look at it positively and not just being a lesbian but just diversity in general. So I just try to encourage increased awareness around all those areas.

I think that I treat homosexuality as it's a part of life; yeah I'm very positive about it.

The equating of authenticity with positive leadership was especially pertinent to one participant. Her response to the question, "Are you a good role model?" was compelling:

No, not as gay role model no, as a role model in everyday living yes; but no not for the gay kids.

Based on her instant consideration of LGBTT youth and the detachment of her sexuality from her definition of a role model, I continued to ask her, “Which attributes make a teacher a good role model?” She replied:

Being genuine is probably a big one, which I know I’m not doing.

This participant’s inability to fulfill her personal definition of a role model was undoubtedly a source of guilt. Her feeling of culpability suggests that like the women who participated in Khayatt’s 1992 study, she somehow perceives the welfare of LGBTT youth as her a responsibility that she is not meeting. This again show the loss to a school community when lesbian teachers feel unsafe in coming out.

Ultimately, Khayatt is right, no one can decide to be a role model but they can decide to live their life in a manner that they deem positive and healthy. After interviewing these women it is my position that a role model, or this idealized image of a role model, is not created by a person’s level of outness. A role model is an idyllic representation of what the women aspire to be and it is here that outness is a factor, for there is no room for dishonesty in their perceptions of a role model. The women I interviewed uniformly perceived a role model as someone who is truthful, genuine, and willing to stand for what they believe. They perceive the hiding of their identity as diametrically opposed to the idealized role model and as a result experienced feelings of guilt, shame, and failure.

In her article titled *Sex and the Teacher: Should We Come Out in Class?* Khayatt (1997) debates the common reason people cite for coming out and asks, “Of what pedagogical

importance is this instance of coming out?” (p. 133). It is her position that leaving a teacher’s sexual orientation vague without declaration could prove more pedagogically challenging for all students. She advocates that explicitly coming out could, because of personal beliefs, cause students to view the teacher in such a negative manner that it interferes with learning and a better approach may be to discuss issues of sexuality with the class.

I question the transferability of Khayatt’s suggestion. She teaches at a university with students who are not only adults but typically have the “good manners” not to blatantly question her sexuality; this is not the case for my participants. Students (read children) will unashamedly engage a teacher in a discussion about her sexuality and several women adamantly expressed their discomfort and feelings of risk surrounding teaching courses such as PDR. After talking to women who are publicly out I realized that their disclosure to students was fuelled by much more than their personal desire for acceptance and recognition; they did not, or could not, separate their sexual identity from their role as educator and being out was essential to their pedagogy.

All the women interviewed commented on the need for diversity within our schools, but for those who are publicly out, there was a common belief that diversity is modelled versus inactively attained and they acknowledged their own responsibility in the creation of a diverse world. It was apparent that although the women believed in being positive role models for LGBTT youth, this responsibility extended beyond their own community; this is the pedagogical importance. I asked the publicly out women if it was important that **all** students know that they are lesbian (or however they self-identified) and they unanimously agreed that it is vital that students know.

Having students understand that role models come in many forms was fundamental for one participant:

I do. I think it's important because I really stress that we need to celebrate [all of] our diversity...Yeah I do because we're working towards equality right; we're constantly trying to achieve that goal. So I think that it is important that all students realize that their role models in the community are diverse people and that it's okay and that it's good. So yes, I think it's very important.

This need to represent diversity was echoed by another woman who was publicly out:

It's important that they know I have a life outside of school that might be a little bit different than what they see at home but it's the same. I want them to know it's the same, I just happen to have a female partner and you know we go through a lot of the same things.

For one participant, her response to this question was inspiring:

Yes [coming out is] a risk but you're also I believe saving lives, it is just being true to you. I think the coming out process really allows you and encourages those we work with to liberate the spirit that we all were born with. It is only when we do this that we all can truly celebrate life every day, and when you're proud of that being I believe we radiate this optimism to other people. Sometimes pride can be a source of conflict resolution in itself.

Although teachers are purveyors of social norms, they have the potential to also embrace roles that encourage and support diversity within their classrooms. The opportunity "to responsibly

guide students towards an understanding of the similarities in people from diverse cultures” (Melillo, 2003, p. 18) was expressed by the teachers who were publicly out.

The notion that coming out normalizes homosexuality has been repeatedly discussed by researchers and was certainly an opinion expressed by participants. Khayatt (1997) questions this perspective, claiming that coming out alone cannot create an atmosphere of inclusion for lesbian teachers, that, in fact, political activism must occur. She asks her readers,

How do sheer numbers of people coming out produce change? Although my intention is not to compare oppressions, one can argue that sheer numbers of African Americans or African Canadians have not eliminated racism in either the United States or Canada (p. 136).

I see something fundamentally flawed in this non-comparison. Unlike skin colour, sexuality identity is not obvious; it takes a declaration to be recognized. A lesbian teacher does not have to disclose her sexual identity to be socially or professionally active but she does have to feel safe enough to exercise her political and human rights. Based on the comments of the participants in this study who distanced themselves from LGBTTT issues to avoid detection, I suggest that political activism is much more likely to happen when lesbian teachers are out or not feeling the necessity to hide their sexuality. One of the participants who is publicly out recognized a need to implement a policy pertaining to the use of homophobic language. Earlier in the interview she commented on the supportive nature of all her colleagues, she discussed how they embraced diversity and her personally. Although she felt encouraged by the heterosexual staff members, it was evident that this woman is empowered by being out and connecting with the other out LGBTTT teachers on her staff.

As she explained:

I can push, and I have the confidence and strength to make something different happen and the message gets out. Now that the gay and lesbian staff are out, there's power in numbers.

The conundrum of coming out to students is complex and for my participants it was viewed as the last level of outness. This was evident when I asked if they were out. The women who are conditionally out qualified their responses, typically in relation to their students or staff, while the women who are publicly out simply answered "yes" or as one woman responded, "all the way". For these women coming out to students is about so much more than a declaration, it is a personal journey and in this journey my participants were empowered. All the women in this study agreed that their sexuality alone does not make them good role models. For the women who are publicly out, their definitions of role models extended to include people who are proud of who they are, who make a contribution to their school, they combat stereotypes, and show students that not all teachers are heterosexual. These women teach all children that the world they live in is diverse; families and role models come in many forms, not just the dominant ones.

When Students Come Out to Participants

In talking to these women I was curious to know if students had ever come out to them. Typically when students come out to teachers they perceive that person as safe and supportive (Wichman, 2005). I was curious to know how the lesbian teachers I interviewed perceived this event and any emotions that may surround a student coming out to them. For one participant who actively helps with her school's GSA, and is conditionally out, having students come out to her

caused distress and self-reflection. This again demonstrates the perception of hidden sexuality as deceitful or fraudulent, thus negatively affecting the participant's sense of self:

That happened plenty when I was doing my practicum. I never came out to anybody, had they asked I would tell them because I do feel sometimes like a hypocrite doing GSAs and promoting being who you are and then not doing it myself.

Another participant took a very professional approach when dealing with students who have come out to her:

I've had students come out to me, and I try to be very nonchalant and see what they want to do and where they're at in their process, try to be very open with them just like any other issue...I'll share a little bit with them but when I'm talking to a kid that's thirteen I may use some experiences about when I was thirteen or fourteen, but I'm really not going to talk to them about experiences when I'm in my mid-thirties it's irrelevant.

This position of supporting them and their process was repeated by another participant. When she, a publicly out teacher, recounted this story she smiled and seemed honoured that a student would share something so personal with her:

Yeah I've had quite a few students come out which has been incredible, wonderful. I think for every student it's an individual process, extremely personal and although my process was full of celebration, it doesn't always happen that way. I think I just allow them their time, with open ears and a closed mouth, to tell me. They just need a safe place to talk, and it just tends to go from there.

The two other women who are also publicly out, reacted in a manner similar to the previous participant:

[One student] she had to tell me something and she just came out and she said “you were the first person I could tell”. It was amazing, it was beautiful and I gave her a big hug and I just told her a little bit of what I had experienced and she was so excited. I just opened it up that if she ever needed to talk to me she could phone or email. I’ve seen her a few times at gay pride events and things with her partner, and she always comes running over.

This year there’s been students that have come out to me. Oh I was very touched, and these kids are having a really hard time with it, so I know that me being there, them seeing me as a good role model [was safe for them].

These last comments are central to the discussion of role modelling and the effect of feeling fear. Again, there is no way to know how the students perceived these teachers and whether this perception was dependent on their degree of outness. What is important is the reaction of the women. For those who were conditionally out there was again a separation of their identity and a very “professional” handling of the situation. This is not a criticism, these women clearly have their students’ best interests at heart, and, as Leighann Wichman (2005) points out, they were “identified [by the student] as a supportive and open-minded individual with whom they felt safe” (p. 53). However, as a researcher I could not help but notice the reaction and body language of the women who are publicly out as they discussed students coming out to them; there was joy in their words. Maybe these women felt fortunate that a student would trust them or perhaps it reinforced that their being publicly out was making a difference in their students’ lives and they that were in fact creating a safe school. When I asked

one participant why she felt it important that her students know she's a lesbian she instantly thought of the effect it could have on LGBTT youth, "so that they feel somewhat safe, if they happen to be gay or lesbian, [or want] to come out".

Advocating for LGBTT Students

An important part of teaching is advocating for students. Students often need a teacher to speak on their behalf because they are in some way silenced. In too many schools LGBTT youth represent an invisible group who often rely on the voices of teachers to advocate for them. These young people may face astronomical rates of suicide, homelessness, all forms of abuse, and self harm; as well many LGBTT students display amazing feats of resilience. For the purposes of this research it was important to hear participants describe how they advocated for LGBTT youth, if their degree of outness impacted these actions, and if so were these actions shaped by in any way by fear.

In this context I am using the word "advocate" to represent situations where the teacher interacts with other people for the purpose of somehow helping the student. Such actions may include accessing resources outside the school for the student or discussing the student's difficulties with colleagues, such as a guidance counsellor or members of administration. This term is not being used to denote the private conversations a teacher may have with a student or in class interactions. The women I spoke with "believed that their appreciation of what it is like to be marginalized and judged harshly gave them a special sensitivity" (Griffin, 1992, p. 182) when dealing with or advocating for LGBTT youth.

One participant who is publicly out invoked these sentiments:

I do a lot of work with relationships and a lot of self-disclosure when the time is right. [My sexuality] hasn't impacted any of my relationships negatively; if anything, [for] those going through questions of sexuality, [it] has helped create empathy for them, a safe place and I understand what they're going through.

Possessing a unique ability to empathize was also commented on by a participant who was conditionally out. She did not disclose her sexuality but felt that she could offer students suggestions that may help in the coming out process:

I think I have an insight that other people might not, straight people might not have, in that I can tell them this is going to be tough and these are things you need to think about.

In this discussion I was especially interested to know if the women felt they could safely advocate for LGBTTT youth, meaning was their school community accepting of someone supporting an LGBTTT youth and would doing so threaten them in any way or be perceived as a risk. Two women felt that they could absolutely advocate for any student and not need to come out to do so. Here is how one participant responded when I asked if she could safely advocate for LGBTTT youth:

Absolutely: yeah because I don't need to disclose. Actually I'd do that more for them than I would for myself.

The need to not disclose identity was also expressed by another participant:

I guess advocating for them and for humans in general which is what I always do, I'm big on human rights and talking about that so I think that's good role modelling, recognizing all people and you don't need to come out to do that.

One woman was not as confident or comfortable in advocating for LGBTTT youth:

I think I was probably more confident to advocate before I was in a relationship with a woman. I think because I wasn't advocating for myself then; I think now I'm advocating for them but I'm also advocating for myself and before I was just advocating for them. There's nothing behind it; there's no personal agenda.

I asked her if she thought that's how people would see it:

Oh yeah, totally. I would fight those battles before and advocate for those kids, or confront teachers and people who would say things that were inappropriate.

I continued to ask if she thought that her advocating would be perceived as an ulterior motive. She answered "yes" and facetiously added, "Yeah, like I have that power to turn somebody gay". Many researchers may propose that a teacher's job is to deliver the curriculum and disagree that they are responsible to advocate for students. The participants of this study however, expressed concern for their student's and viewed their welfare as a part of their responsibilities as a teacher; by not doing this they felt remorse. For the previous participant, advocating for students is yet another area of teaching where she must walk a line to maintain the perception of being objective and separated from her lesbian identity. How can schools be safe space when even helping a student in need causes fear for some lesbian teachers?

Everyone Needs a Role Model

Behaviour is observed, it is assessed, it conveys meaning, and often, it is embodied by those searching for guidance and leadership. Researchers have been quick to point out that LGBTT youth are in dire need of positive role modelling (Epstein & Johnson, 1998 ; DeJean, 2007; Walker, 2004; Gregory, 2004; Jackson, 2006) but what about lesbian teachers? Do they need or want role models? If so, who are they? After listening to the participants in this study, it appears that they too are hungry for positive role models and leaders in their school community. For one of the women who were conditionally out, she expressed her admiration for publicly out teachers:

When I decide to change schools, and I hope to change schools sooner than later, I hope that I can go to a new school and just be me; the me now and that I can be open certainly with my staff and my administration, because I admire people that are like that. I think it shows real comfort in who they are and that they don't give a shit what the people in the office think.

Another participant discussion wished to know of a lesbian teacher who is out and who had a positive experience:

In a way I'd kind of like to have a lesbian teacher come out and tell me all about it and tell me that it was great. I know it does happen but I don't hear it a lot, most of my friends who are teachers seem to say that they don't come out even to staff.

This desire for colleague role models extends beyond setting a positive example; it also directly speaks to the women's feelings of isolation. Of the women who are publicly out, two reported that they had several members of the LGBTT community that worked in their schools

who are also out to the entire school community, whereas the women who were conditionally out had no members of their staff that were publicly out; in their daily lives, outness is not modelled. The sentiment was echoed by a publicly out participant when describing another teacher at her school who had out to the entire school community:

We had a very strong character on staff for years, a male teacher who was very, very well respected, and I think that did a lot, I think that he did a lot by being open and being such an amazing person and he really made it easy for the rest of us.

Whether the participants were conditionally or publicly out, they collectively agreed that the importance of a supportive administration was immeasurable. For the women who participated in this research, principals and vice principals held enormous potential for inspiration and disappointment. The administration sets the tone in a school and for lesbian teachers this atmosphere constructs perception surrounding their safety. Contributory to the overall mood created by an administration, are their decisions surrounding discipline where they construct expectations of what is acceptable behaviour of both students and staff. How they handle issues of homophobia is particularly important for a lesbian teacher's sense of safety and support.

I asked one woman if her school had a GSA, her response adds insight to her perceptions of community and the leadership of her administration:

I know at other schools they do have gay/straight alliance[s], but not too many junior highs do and a lot of principals are very reluctant. I think mine will be too even though I know she's cool about it, it's because of the community and she's afraid of parents.

The need for leadership was repeated when I asked a participant what needs to change in order for schools to be a safe place to come out:

You know where the most work needs to be done, teachers and administrators, not the kids. As soon as we educate and open the minds of our administrators and teachers so that they're okay with it and they're okay with themselves, it will filter right down through.

For a participant who was publicly out, she was quick to recognize her own privilege in that she has an administration that not only supports but encourages her to be proud of her identity:

Well a few years ago we started a GSA, we wanted to, or I should say, I wanted to have the international day against homophobia in May. We wanted to do something for that, and I believe because I [became] an advocate for diversity of all sexual orientations and because I was so proud, so passionate; my administration saw that. I think they believed that themselves. They would just say "Do whatever you want, get the kids on board", they got on board, a few teaching staff got on board. Yeah I feel supported one hundred percent.

Support is essential in the daily lives of educators but having an administrator who embraces your identity as a lesbian is also fundamental when trying to implement policy:

Yeah I believe it's everything when you are trying to create programming for equity, and policies that support [you] when those boundaries are crossed, knowing that you have the support of your administration; It's everything.

When asked how schools could better support teachers coming out and leading open lives, the absence of out lesbian administrators was quickly noted. One conditionally out participant noted:

There are people in high administration that are gay, you wouldn't know it, but they're there.

I asked her if it would be helpful to the education system if more LGBTT administrations were open about their sexuality:

I think it would be better for me as an individual, but I understand why they don't; they don't want it to play a factor in the decisions they have to make and the way people respond and react to them, so I get why they don't. But for me as a gay teacher it would mean something.

This response again reinforces the need for visible LGBTT persons. The participant sees the closeting of administrators as something necessary for self preservation. This woman's own fears and stigma consciousness are underlying in her comments regarding how people would react to an openly lesbian administrator; again, she expects the worst to happen.

For the women who participated in this study, the need for role models extended beyond the walls of schools and reached the board level. When I started this research it was my expectation that discussions surrounding sexuality would supersede those of gender and/ or sex; for the most part this was the case. However, when I asked the women, "Do you feel that school boards and unions treat all its members equally?" I was surprised by the responses.

The persons in positions of power were comment on by one participant:

You see males getting principal positions, administrative positions in a field where it's mainly females but the people in power are males.

This inequity was repeated by another woman who had witnessed discriminatory hiring practices:

There's still a boys' club in schools. I've always worked for male administrators. I've had one female VP but I've never had a female principal, so I've seen that the whole way along. I had one VP talking about he was hiring a female sub because she was pretty and they were going to get her in as many days as they could, and he's openly saying this and we were sitting there.

Another woman equated aggression with masculinity when she discussed how women succeed in schools:

There are lots of females in power but they've got to be aggressive; if they are not aggressive they won't be there. They have to be more masculine.

One participant had difficulty deciding if her negative experiences were due to her sexuality or her sex:

You see as a strong feminist I had a lot of equity issues that I was dealing with as a coach and as a female teacher, so often it was mixed, I found the two really mixed together, so it was hard sometimes to separate it because sometimes I wasn't sure if it was because I was a woman or because I was a lesbian.

From these comments it is obvious that the participants interpret their sex as subordinate within their respective school boards. In addition to comments pertaining to sex, the participants held strong opinions surrounding certain perceived hiring practices and inequities within their boards. Male privilege was commonplace in one woman's school:

I see when we [have] to hire term teachers and we have to hire long term subs, generally the people that are in the building every day doing those substitute jobs are females and they come in faithfully every day they're called; but when a term position comes up or a long term sub, they give it to a male.

One participant perceived the betterment of students' lives as something rarely compensated:

You look in our board and you look at people that get hired in positions of power, and you look at the work they've done to get there and you kind of think, they "haven't done a lot". They haven't done a whole lot to improve kids' lives, but they've kissed a lot of ass.

The expected, and rewarded, silence of LGBTTT teachers as also discussed:

So to me people aren't treated equally we play a lip service to that. I think if you're a quiet gay person and you don't make that an issue, then it's not going to play into it, but if you are vocal and you believe things should be done a certain way I think that you fall lower in the rankings; they don't want people to make noise.

One woman perceived the way the school board distributed funds as an example of rigid socioeconomic class.

She also commented on the nature and intended audience of the curricula:

It's like the layers in society the haves get more and people at the margins or at the schools or [some] areas don't. I see that when money is divvied up, or when you walk into certain schools and they have all this equipment, it's certain areas and it's all about the people involved behind them. Well the whole system is geared for white Anglo-Saxon middle class people; like the curriculum is aimed for those kids and we have to spend endless hours adapting it for kids that don't meet those expectations or outcomes.

Of all the questions I asked, this one pertaining to the equality of all board and union members, yielded the most varied reactions. The women I interviewed were consistently eager to talk about their views and perceptions of the school boards for which they worked, and, sadly, few positive comments surfaced. The women also took this opportunity to discuss what they felt needed to change in order to achieve equality in the school system. The first source of leadership must begin in the buildings where these women work, specifically with their colleagues and administration, followed by those at the school board level. It appears that the need for role models exists at all levels of schooling. This leadership is critical if positive change is to occur. As Claudette McKenzie-Bassant (2007) explains,

Only when heterosexuality is de-naturalised in the minds and practices of administrators and planners and then reflected back in policy and practice in institutions as a whole, will the positioning of lesbian and gay teachers as 'negative other' cease, and the [teachers] be freed from the tyranny of walking the thin fine line between inclusive practice and personal exposure (p. 61).

Verbal Pollution in Schools

The use of derogatory and violent language is pervasive and polluting our schools; 90% of LGBTT youth report hearing such slurs on a regular basis (Wichman, 2005). Hallways have become the arena where “insults are spit out with anger, punches are thrown in their defence, and the passing terminology of homosexuality [continues] to ring of clinical and perverted overtones” (Walker, 2004, p. 7). In her 2008 article titled *The N-Word: Reducing Verbal Pollution in School*, Erika Fisher suggests that the hate talk seen on the macro level throughout society is reproduced daily within the education system. Although her discussion was predominantly focused on racial verbal pollution, her points directly apply to the homophobic and heterosexist language heard in Nova Scotia schools.

The conversation surrounding homophobic language in schools was a topic that most participants felt very strongly about. It is important to note that the discussion of homophobic language used between students within school was a conversation initiated by the participants and it was obvious that they found such occurrences harmful. I’ve chosen to discuss these conversations in this chapter because responses of both the participants and administrations speak directly to leadership and role modelling. There was a common opinion that episodes of homophobic language were often ignored by teachers and administration. When homophobic comments were not addressed the participants perceived this inaction as much more than a lack of discipline. One participant commented on the messages that students receive:

It’s tippy-toed around our school, those issues of sexuality. I see when kids are calling each other fag, and I see how an administrator reacts to that; that sends me a message; it sent me a message when I was straight.

This environment that appears to condone homophobia also troubled another woman:

You walk through the hallway and teachers just walk on past and basically that says “I permit you to do that”.

The handling of homophobic comments and the potential to set the tone in a school was expressed by one participant who believed that this could be solved with education:

It’s important because I think it sets the stage for how kids interact with one and other, and how they interact with adults; there’re constant messages being given in language and that’s where I think the board can do work and the union can do work educating schools. I think when you are made aware of it then you can make a conscious decision about how you use language.

The importance of the administration was reiterated by two participants who frequently witness lip-service being paid to acts of homophobia:

My administration I have now I don’t think they know, they’re not comfortable with it themselves so they just say “don’t say that”.

It’s, “don’t say that again, lets’ go to the counsellors, and do the empathy training”.

I used Fisher’s term of verbal pollution not only because it perfectly describes the environment in so many school but because the participants commented on the racist language and the need for similar policies to address homophobia.

The inequity in response to homophobic versus racial comments was a source of frustration for one participant:

If a kid yells out a slander and it's racial they go to the RCH get written up and everything, if they call someone a "faggot", it's "you shouldn't do that", they get a little talking to and then they're sent [back to class]; if we started to treat those types of remarks with the seriousness that racial remarks get treated with, that would stop. That would decrease it, it wouldn't completely get rid of it because you are never going to get rid of that, but it would seriously decrease it.

The need to treat homophobia with the same severity as racism was reiterated by another woman:

They'll talk to the kids, but if a kid is called the N-word in school, and rightfully so, we don't tolerate that, that's written up, those kids' parents are called, and I have to work with those kids around culture and where it's coming from; and the race relationship officer is down there. To me, you treat it the same way, it's the same issue, but it's not so; that sends me a message.

These women repeatedly referred to the message that is sent when homophobic comments are ignored or only passively disciplined. They understand that "words do not exist in a vacuum [and] when left unchallenged they create a culture and an environment that appear to condone bias, prejudice and violence" (Wessler, 2001, p. 30). When left unchallenged this behaviour escalates and for LGBTT youth this can mean the difference between life, death, and an education. As a result of homophobia LGBTT youth often skip school or drop out, while the Canadian suicide rate for these young people is fourteen times that of their heterosexual

counterparts (Wichman, 2005). Addressing this language is imperative for these student's lives and sense of well being. It shows them that this is not okay and there are teachers who support them. One participant regularly addressed homophobic language in her school and it was this action that made a student see her as safe for a student who was struggling with his own sexual identity:

Kids [are probably more likely] to come out to a teacher who is confronting those kids that are using inappropriate language around sexuality; I think that sends a message. The first boy that came out to me at my school, and I had asked him what made him come out to me. I taught him social studies; I taught the other grade nine class social studies not his, but he said because I would call kids out on, "that's so gay", I'd say, "I don't want to hear that it's inappropriate", this is why, and he said nobody else does that here and that's why he came out to me. That sort of interaction he said "you just seemed open-minded".

For another participant, the process of addressing homophobic language was something that took time, but is something she regards as extremely important:

I do say things to kids when they use the terms "gay" and "faggot" and everything else, I address that, and I didn't at first. As I've become more comfortable with my sexuality I [have] felt more comfortable talking about it, and explaining it, and being okay with it.

One participant is still struggling with how to address homophobia language in her school:

I'm guilty of it too. I'm guilty of hearing the word fag and pretending I didn't hear it, because I don't want to be the only teacher out there who's stopping every kid from saying it because then, there I am the lesbian teacher who won't let anybody say things.

It may be easy to criticize teachers, especially LGBTTT teachers, who do not address homophobia but one has to ask, why do these adults feel so unsafe? What is school like for them every day? Just as youth look to teachers, teachers look to administration for leadership and unfortunately they too sometimes lack role models. This was the case for one conditionally out participant who felt that her administration missed an opportunity to affect change:

We had a young man at school last year he would identify himself as straight, so I mean if he is something other than that but that was how he referred to himself. He was in grade nine, a phenomenal young man, he was offended by kids calling kids “fag” in the hall and “that’s so gay”; he got fed up with it. It’s not as bad at our school as other schools I’ve been in, but he didn’t like it so he went on his own to the administration and said, “We need to do one of those talks in the gym again like [the previous teacher] did”. He had gotten that assembly when he was in grade six; and he said “that was really powerful and we need to have something done here like that again because I don’t like that the kids call each other these things, it’s offensive to me and I’m sure its offending other kids”, and they wouldn’t touch it.

Some lesbian teachers may feel have outstanding leadership for a time but have that feeling of safety challenged once an administration or the teacher changes schools. This was the case for one conditionally out participant:

My last administration would not tolerate it, and would do more of an education piece around it with kids; it wasn’t a shut deal “you’re gone” but they would go hard on those kids and then educate those kids. My old administration was, because of their own experiences with their own family members and their own friends, were pretty open to,

“this is how you treat people, all people: I don’t care what your parents think, I don’t care what your father is telling you, this is how you will treat people in my building”. So there was no room for kids to be saying that stuff and saying nasty things in regards to culture or sexuality. My administration I have now I don’t [think they’re] comfortable with it themselves so they just say “don’t say that”.

The need for education versus discipline is crucial if homophobic language is to stop. This, however, will take time and a colossal amount of leadership. There is no magic solution that will cure hate talk. No one program, no matter how well designed or implemented, will remedy the problem. This cannot be fixed by one assembly at the beginning of each school year. As educators, there is a responsibility to protect the children that fill our classrooms and as Stephen Wessler (2001) explains,

Students from traditionally target groups understand that stick and stones may break your bones, but the words of hate may break your soul. Too many children lose hope: Too many gay and lesbian students drop out of school, too many students of color lose faith in a system that they expect to educate them, and too many girls lose faith and confidence in themselves (p. 30).

Teachers and administrators have an incredibly difficult and important role in terminating hegemonic and bigoted language. Any attempt to remove the barbs of derogatory remarks must begin by interrupting the language; adults must intervene when the hate language is used. Their strategies must be consistent and pedagogically sound; with their message rooted deeply in education and acceptance, not punishment and censorship.

Chapter 6

Schools as Safe Spaces: The Need and Potential for Change

A lesbian teacher's decision to come out to one's school community is a choice; one based on numerous unquantifiable factors that are deeply rooted in a person's perceptions of the community in which they teach, the grade, or subject area, or their constructed knowledge surrounding specific events, all of which contribute to the teacher's perception of safety. It is critically important to understand what constitutes safety, how this concept is constructed, how it influences a lesbian teacher's coming out process.

Safety cannot be discretely defined; it is a product of each woman's constructed reality. When I created the proposed interview questions, I planned to ask the participants whether they felt that schools were safe arenas in which to come out. However, I did not explicitly ask this of each woman. I reflected on this question very early in the interview process, partially as a result of one participant's response, "No. I guess that's probably why I haven't come out". Her tone made me wonder whether this question was always appropriate or if in fact she perceived it as redundant. In the descriptions of her daily life it was clear that there were many aspects of this participant's profession that left her feeling unsafe and questioning her amount of support. As a result I only asked this question if it was conversationally appropriate or if the women had not previously commented on feelings of safety within their school and instead, I asked "what does safety mean to you?" and "what would make an environment safe?"

As I interviewed these women I realized that their definitions of safety vary based on their personal experiences and perceptions, yet there were common themes in the participants' concepts of what made a space safe. Many women were quick to differentiate between physical and emotional safety. While there was significant discussion surrounding emotional safety,

several women expressed feeling physically unsafe in their schools due to what they perceived as increased violence between students. Throughout this work perceptions of safety have been repeatedly discussed in terms of actual scenarios or specific risk factors but when I asked the women how they defined safety they spoke in general terms. For them, a safe space is somewhere they are free to be themselves and openly discuss their relationships without feeling fear of reprisal. These women are not asking to be celebrated, they are not even asking to be equal, but they are asking to be accepted and not different.

Towards the end of each interview I asked the women, what in their perception must change to make the education system a safer place for all LGBTT teachers and students; their responses were very similar. The need for education was the central themes in all the women's comments. In their opinion, if change is to occur education must happen at every level of schooling but the most potential for reform lies with classroom teachers. The participants strongly vocalized the need for compulsory teacher professional development surrounding LGBTT issues.

The participants felt that there were several aspects of the inclusive curriculum that required immediate attention. The first was the use and handling of homophobic language within schools by teachers and administration. They agreed that continuing to censor language without educating staff and students was an ineffective method that could potentially make matters worse for LGBTT students. Although the women felt that this approach was futile in creating change, they perceived it to be better than ignoring homophobic language; an inaction that sends a damaging message to students that homophobia is condoned.

Another issue that was perceived as requiring immediate change was how schools are interacting with the children of same-sex families. The teachers genuinely believed that these

families were being ignored and discriminated against. They cited examples of heterosexist practices that marginalize these families and negate their existence. This behaviour was perceived to be harmful to students. As the participants discussed, these students are a part of the school population that, like any culturally diverse group, deserve to be recognized. On a positive note, the teachers reported feeling supported by their union, the NSTU, and viewed their recent actions to increase awareness of LGBTTT issues as a step in the right direction.

I ended each interview by asking the participant what advice they would offer to a lesbian planning to enter the teaching profession. In their replies, all the women offered words of caution, most of which had little positive encouragement. They offered practical advice regarding physical contact and suggested that to come out prematurely would be risky. Only two of the participants, who were publicly out, suggested that the prospective lesbian teachers be true to themselves and not compromise their ethics to fit into what was socially expected of them.

Safety: A Socially Constructed Definition

The participant's contextually dependent definition of safety was determined by the constructed realities of their everyday lives. Although these women have legal protection, for some it is little comfort in their day-to-day existence as teachers in the public school system. The response of one participant shows the difference in perception with regard to legal protection and the occurrences of daily life:

I think they are safer now than they were ten years ago, I still don't think [schools are] completely safe. I think there are a lot more checks and balances in place for a teacher to feel [safe], I guess, that the law's on their side, but that doesn't mean that it's a safe place to be where they're being taunted or whatever.

For one participant who is publicly out her perception of whether schools are safe is based solely on her prior experiences and feelings:

I've never felt unsafe, I've never felt fear and because of that I can say yeah I totally believe that my school and my community is safe for me being out, I have no reason to believe it's not.

After reflecting on the question, "Are schools safe places to be out?" I realized that for the purposes of this study asking women how they defined and interpreted safety was of greater importance. To better understand how lesbian teachers determine whether a setting is safe, I began by asking them, "What does being safe mean to you?" As mentioned earlier, the difference between their physical and emotional safety was distinguished. For one participant, witnessing student violence impacted her perceptions of safety:

Physically safe, no. There are people that walk in here that the office doesn't catch, I think that they are trying, but I don't feel physically safe at all times. I've seen fights arise outside my classroom; I've tried to stop fights outside my classroom. [Sometimes] I don't feel safe at all.

Another participant also commented on the violent behaviour seen in schools:

In terms of physical safeness around students this year it would be okay, last year I might have said no because there was a lot more violence last year.

One participant seemed especially upset about the violence that she has witnessed this year between students.

When telling this story she appeared frustrated and angry:

A lot of bullying happens in Phys Ed locker rooms and I had this conversation with [some other] teachers, and I had just told them that that's where a lot of bullying happens. I [went to unlock] the boys changing room, and a kid came out spitting out his two front teeth; he had just gotten ploughed in the face. In twenty-one years of teaching I'd never seen that.

This participant also pointed out that this altercation continued once the students returned to school after a suspension and again, she had to get involved for the sake of the student's safety. In her description of the event it was evident that acting as referee in a physical exchange was not a role she welcomed or viewed as congruent with education. For the participants of this study, being safe meant several things, one of which was the ability to be themselves. As two participants describe, being safe is inherently tied to being free:

Being able to be me, to be able to talk about things I want to talk about and just feel safe being who I am.

Having the comfort to just be me and just be able to interact with everybody and not feel people are going to make judgement, or people are going to be chatting, or people are going to be phony; because I think that there are a lot of people that do that; pretend they're comfortable with something and deep down they're not.

Supportive administration and colleagues were central to one woman's definition of safety:

I think being safe emotionally would mean to me being able to go into admin and just talk about me being gay or anyone on staff.

For one participant, to be free from abuse and have people see beyond her sexuality was critical for her to feel safe:

Being safe means I can walk down the hallway in the school without any fear that I'm going to be attacked based on who I love, that I'm going to be judged on what type of person I am and to me that's the bottom line. I mean your character should be the number one thing.

This sentiment was repeated by another woman but she added that she must also be free from worrying about what other people think. Perhaps this is something only she can change:

Safe means free from verbal, physical, emotional attack and free again to be who I am without thinking twice about anyone else, what they're talking about or thinking about me, just not [worrying] about what people think.

The participants' responses all had two very important themes; to be safe means to be free and to be free means to be who you are. There were women in this study who separated, or even fractured, their identities as lesbian and teacher, yet in their idealized definition of safety, these identities are tightly bonded and indivisible. This desire to "be themselves" was reiterated when I asked them what makes someone an ally. Again, women expressed the need to have their relationships acknowledged and not be treated differently. The ability to share aspects of her life was deemed important by one participant:

I think what makes them an ally is I can just be me. I can talk about my weekend what me and [my partner] did, or if me and [my partner] are not getting along, I can say that and be comfortable. I can just talk like they talk. I can invite them over to my house and not have to hide the pictures or [have my partner] go out.

This sentiment was echoed by another woman in her definition of an ally:

I [can] talk about my partner the same way they talk about theirs.

For one woman, an ally sees does not treat people differently based on who they love:

I think mostly because they don't treat me, or the fact that I have a same sex partner, as any different as any other staff member; and I can share some personal aspects of my life.

For one participant, an ally sees her sexuality as a part of who she is, not what defines her:

I think it's because it's not a big deal, it's just another part of who I am, just like I'm an aunt, I'm an animal owner.

All of the women who participated in this study perceived some level of support at school, whether it be a small select group of colleagues or the school community in general. From this support the participants have identified and categorized what it is about these people that make them feel safe. In their descriptions of an ally, the women's desire to be open about who they are is conspicuous. They are not asking to be celebrated; they are asking to not be different. They want to be accepted, to have the same privileges as heterosexual teachers who speak openly about the people they love, without fear of reprisal or accusation.

Suggestions for Necessary Change

Overall the women who participated in this research were especially forthcoming but in no area more so than when discussing the need for change. I asked the women, "What do you think needs to change to make schools and the education system a safer place for LGBTT persons?" The women identified several aspects of schooling that directly affect a school's environment and contribute to a feeling of safety. Ironically, they all perceived that such issues

could be drastically improved upon with increased education and respectful communication. This need for education extended beyond students to include teachers and administrators. In terms of teacher education, several women adamantly expressed the opinion that school boards were not providing their employees with enough professional development (PD) pertaining to LGBTT and human rights issues. One participant has seen this lack of PD for many years:

I think all this money they threw at math and literacy, it's not wrong but how many years have they thrown a ton of money behind it when they could be having workshops on sensitizing staff to human rights issues like sexuality.

The nature of PD was also questioned by one participant where issues of sexuality are not prioritized or mandatory. Her response is unique because she actually inquired why such education was not happening and was met with the standard response that these issues are taboo:

I really and truly think that a lot of PD must be done with administrators and teachers; it has to become a priority in the schools to increase awareness around all sorts of diversity. In my board in particular, in four years, there's been no professional development around homophobia or anything around sexual diversity, except you know teachers can go to the equity conference but that's by choice; but there's been nothing at any regional principals meeting or any families/schools meetings...nothing, nothing. I even brought it up to the RCH and ask what's been done and she said "oh it's a very touchy subject". But I really think that as soon as teachers come to grips with things and take some ownership on how the kids are going to react and act, and what's going to be permitted and what's going to be acceptable at school; they're the ones that make all the decisions in the classroom.

As one participant pointed out, lesbian teachers often face emotional stress, yet for some women there is little support:

We're expected to do so many things and at the same point there isn't a lot of counselling or there isn't a lot of safety nets that we can jump into, and we have to put ourselves out on a limb and it's sort of expected to do that a lot, and I don't think there's a lot of solace area for us.

On a positive note, multiple participants commented on the NSTU's increased attention to education, citing the inclusion of LGBTTT issues in policies and an increased focus on diversity.

One participant noticed and appreciated the recent work on the NSTU:

Well I've noticed in the NSTU they've included sexual orientation under a lot of the different policies, so that certainly helps. I think talking about it, talking about gay, like normalizing it and having the GSA's.

Another woman took comfort in being protected by her union:

I feel like the board and union are protecting us, I feel like every time I've ever come out to anybody, well in the union, that nobody's ever batted an eyelash or had an issue. You know my partner's on my health insurance and we've accessed services without any problems.

Whether a result of the Lindsay Willow incident, a recent provincial equity conference that focused entirely on LGBTTT issues, or the distributed posters mentioned earlier in this writing, the women's perception of the NSTU was overall positive and the union's actions were viewed as steps in the right direction.

Pedagogy of Censorship, Diverse Families, and the Call for Education

In their discussions relating to the prevalence of homophobic language in schools the participants repeatedly commented on how such incidents are handled by teachers and administrators. The standard response, “you can’t say that,” troubled the participants and was viewed as only marginally more effective than completely ignoring homophobic language. This practice of what Heather Sykes (2004) refers to as pedagogy of *censorship* works to remove homophobic and heterosexist comments from the school system by policing language and punishing the offenders. The participants of this study recognized that this approach is important at an institutional level, but it is “fragile and will always be only partially successful” (Sykes, 2004, p. 77). Such pedagogy is delicate in nature because it is founded on suppression of language versus an educational approach that critically examines dominant discourses and unbalanced power relationships. As expressed by one woman, this practice of blindly disciplining students does not create positive change:

It’s about educating, I think punishing is absolutely the wrong thing to do, to punish somebody, because then they are going to [be] angry and who are they going to take it out on, the reason why they got punished, the gay people.

The ability of students to learn was also recognized by a participant:

I don’t think to yell and scream or think that discipline has to happen first. I try to mediate before I take it to the office, so I’ll give them a chance to correct their behaviour. Most of the time kids are reasonable, the few times I’ve yelled at them it hasn’t worked, it doesn’t work you know.

Homophobic language cannot be allowed to go unchallenged by teachers because when it does, the wound is twofold; first the hateful slur and second the silence that conveys acceptance of such bigotry. Although the policing and punishing of language as an absolute solution is futile, as the participants explained it can serve as a starting point for education and ultimately safety.

Here two women discuss the impact of language and the possibility for change:

It's important for the whole school system to be more inclusive and welcoming, and so that kids don't feel that they are just out there on the fringe and being excluded and being judged because of their sexuality; they have so much to deal with anyway. I know in the school system ever since I can remember, language is rarely addressed whether it's from student to student or how teachers [use] the language they use when they teach.

I think that if in the school it was normal to be gay and the word gay was never tolerated in a derogatory manner. You know if people called children every time they put down a gay person I think then we could start moving towards being safe.

Another participant points out that to be truly effective, teacher education must result in diversity being consistently incorporated in every aspect of schooling:

Education is huge and the RCH policy needs to be implemented. I think we need more teacher education around RCH, and how to have it incorporated into every day curriculum, conversations, and school climate.

Throughout the process of interviewing lesbian teachers I often found myself amazed, dismayed, impressed, and grateful when hearing these women's stories and perspectives. As I asked the women what, in their informed position, needed changing to make the education system a safer place for LGBTT people, the nature of one their answers surprised me. I had spent

considerable time discussing and considering the needs of LGBTTT youth but I never thought to ask the participants about another very diverse group; the children of same-sex parents. This is a population that is steadily increasing and is of marked importance to the participants of this study; one woman already has a child and others may at some point in their life. They viewed this as an area requiring immediate attention and more importantly education. For two women they perceived the lack of discussion surrounding same-sex families as another area requiring change:

I don't think our board does enough around same sex families.

I don't think the schools themselves do a good job at making kids aware that there are families that are same sex.

The seemingly obvious point was also made by two participants that in ignoring these families, schools and teachers are negating a portion of their population which they have a responsibility to acknowledge:

I would say most schools or lots of schools have same sex families in them; and I don't think teachers are prepared very well for that, which is a shame, we just kind of ignore it. I think they act like it's really not happening.

That's the population that comes into our building everyday and we owe that to them regardless of teachers. We're a public education system and we have to adapt to deal, the public is not all the same. We don't do a good job, we're still very narrow-minded in this school system and it's just the subtle things.

As the diversity of students increases so must teachers' practices. Too frequently the only type of family presented as the norm is of opposite-sex, also isolating families that are either single parent or blended. The inclusion of diverse families must start with an examination of the language that is used in schools that continues to permeate teaching practices and curricula.

As one participant explains, this use of heterosexist language must be recognized at many levels of education before it can be changed:

It's just taken for granted I think. We always make heterosexual references and I've recognised that for a long time, how we make those references all the time. It's just a part of our language that we are not conscious of breaking, and some people I don't think would even attempt to break it. I think it sets the stage for how kids interact with one another, and how they interact with adults; there're constant messages being given in language and that's where I think the board can do work and the union can do work educating schools about same sex families, the forms and also how we talk to kids, instead of putting them in little boxes. People can be made aware of those things because I think when you are made aware of it then you can make a conscious decision about how you use language.

In addition to language certain practices were also viewed as heterosexist and exclusionary for the children of same-sex parents. One woman discussed the standard forms that list heterosexual parents; she cited these as an example of a marginalizing practice:

I think if teachers could have some training in that area they may be a little bit more sensitive to the needs of those kids. Teachers should be reading books with same-sex parents in them and there should be posters up in school, and there should be

conversation around it, and it shouldn't be "let's go to the gay person on staff and see how we should deal with these people"; and forms should be standard, parent 1 parent 2, no form should have mother father.

This sentiment of exclusion was echoed by another participant:

[Same-sex families] are just ignored, even the forms that say father and mother we still send a lot of that stuff home.

As one woman correctly adds, it is not only same-sex families that are excluded by these forms:

Everything is heterosexual every example is heterosexual, and teachers don't even think about it or they don't even think that there's a possibility of another population out there or something slightly different. You know when you look at kids there are very few families now with a mother and a father, I mean that's becoming the minority. I think a lot of teachers still don't open their minds and hearts to what kids are going through.

I asked one participant, who mentioned the need for inclusive language, if she thought that this was harmful for students from same-sex families; her response:

Yeah because it makes them grow up to think that that's the norm all the time, and when they aren't that "mother father living in a house kind of family", which we know a lot of kids aren't that anymore, then we are sending a message to those kids that something's wrong, "this is perfect and you're not that".

The points made by the participants highlight the prevalence of dominant heterosexist norms that exist in the education system and the overwhelming need for positive change. As Goldstein, Russell, and Daley (2007) explain, "schools abdicate their responsibility for

challenging power systems and culture that privilege heterosexuality over homosexuality” (p. 185). Marginalizing language rests at the heart of these hegemonic power systems. Until students are taught to critically analyze the privilege and power of relationships, change is indefinite.

Advise to Future Lesbian Teachers

There is no doubt that perceptions, lived experiences, and constructed knowledge have shaped these women’s outlook on life. I was interested to know how the events of their daily lives as lesbian teachers have impacted their view of the profession and the education system. To better understand, I asked the women: if they could, what advice would they offer to lesbians who were planning to pursue a career in education; their hypothetical suggestions resonated with caution. The warning of physical contact with students was what one teacher offered:

I guess maybe I would probably offer the advice, don’t put yourself alone with [a] student if you don’t need to, that would be the one thing I would say.

The notion that “quiet” lesbians fare better was repeated by one participant who was sceptic of potential support:

You have to find a support network within your school and that’s hard to do. Don’t walk into a staff room and wear it on your sleeve.

Two participants initially said that they would not offer advice but instantly contradicted their statement with words of caution:

I don’t think I’d offer any advice I would just say be who you are and be careful.

I don't think I would. I think you have to deal with each situation as they arise, and so I couldn't say to somebody come out or don't come out because I'm still in limbo with that.

The presence of stigma consciousness was forefront in one of the women's responses:

Just try to be yourself and pick and choose your battles. I think for any new teacher you'd be crazy to come out too quick if it means that you may not get a job; and I can't think that it wouldn't be in the back of your head going, "Is this going to prevent me from being recommended for a permanent position?"

The necessity for safety was reiterated but this participant also cautioned future teachers from taking comfort in the rights they deserved:

I would caution them to be careful and make sure that they felt safe before they did it, and not to make the assumption that because they should be safe that they will be. They have to get to know their community, but at the same time I would not want to discourage them because that's not my call. I mean everybody has their different levels of comfort.

I found the scepticism of these two participants to be particularly disconcerting but also understandable. These women seemed to have lost, or never acquired, faith in their protection of rights as educators. Their sense of safety has been shaken and fear has permeated their lives. Again the overtones of identity management are ubiquitous in some of the recommendations.

One participant offered:

I think it's really important that people get to know you first, and then divulge... You do need to find a support network and I think that's the most important thing.

Her proposal of having people “get to know you first” before you “divulge” suggests that in order to be accepted a lesbian teacher should fracture her identity in an attempt to make friends and then disclose her sexuality with the hope that those colleagues will continue to be allies. This “have them like me first” approach may reduce the risk of coming out but it also has mass potential to backfire. What if this approach is perceived as manipulative or deceitful?

The participants seem adamant about encouraging prospective teachers to be “themselves” but it is said with warning and contradiction. Similar to their feelings regarding role modelling, it seems that the participants have an idealized view of how teachers should conduct themselves, with genuineness and honesty, yet they cannot help but warn future teachers of the possible dangers that lurk ahead. Clearly the participants view the behaviour of openly gay teachers as risky and potentially dangerous should that teacher wish to advance in the school system. This was evident in their warnings of not “wearing it on your sleeve” or being “careful”, but how does this coincide with the notion of pride? If you are “choosing your battles” does this mean that you are sacrificing your identity? Overall there was little optimistic advice and the themes of these comments speak to the challenges these women face each day. However, and still with caution, two publicly out women did encourage future lesbian teachers to be true to themselves and to not sacrifice their identity. Here are their suggestions:

Just be who you are. You don't have to be in everybody's face, you don't have to go in there on the attack about who you are, but you must love and accept and be proud of who you are. You know, go in shame free and just basically talk about [it]. I don't like the word “normalize”, but just be who you are. You don't have to go out and wave flags but if you feel like wearing a rainbow flag every now and then that's fine too [and] explain it if someone asks. Just talk to students and if they have questions just answer them, you

don't have to go into depth about [your] personal life or anything but just be honest and straightforward. I think part of it's being a good role model, so that if you're comfortable with who you are often the students will be.

You know you'll be asked by children all the questions that really push you to get in touch with yourself. So if [you] have that shame or discomfort, once you're in the classroom if you don't have a good handle on it [students will pick up on it]. However you present yourself, whatever message are you giving those little people about the rules of being who they are, that's the power that you have.

The comments of these women are especially thought provoking and they raise the familiar debate of whether coming out in the classroom is a healthy practice. Ultimately, no one can judge the choice a teacher makes when deciding to come out but the potential effects of these choices can be debated. For many lesbian teachers disclosure of their sexuality is either explicit, nonexistent, or somewhere in between. As earlier discussed, Khayatt (1997) questions the pedagogical soundness of declaring one's sexuality to a class for fear that this action will reinforce the sexual binary and reduce critical thinking. As an approach somewhere between denial and disclosure, Khayatt allows her students who so require "to pick up on whatever cues are scattered in [her] speech in order to determine [her] sexual orientation" (1997, p. 127). Khayatt's approach to revealing one's sexuality lacks consideration of heterosexism. If she is allowing her students to "connect the dots" she must consider the option that they will label her as heterosexual no matter how obvious her clues.

As the last participant points out, presenting sexuality as taboo and private combined with a teacher's position of power has an opportunity to negatively influence student's view of homosexuality. Pollack (1994) supports this position, claiming "a role model who is in the closet

is not a role model at all...what they are really saying is that you can be lesbian or gay in education provided you hide your identity” (p. 133), while Donahue (2007) proposes that “in an era of explicitness in standards in education, choosing not to be explicit about sexuality could be construed as the same as devaluing it” (p. 87). Whether a lesbian teacher decides to disclose or hide her sexuality, one thing is certain: her choice directly impacts the message she sends her students and her role as an educator.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The primary change in perception must begin with the lesbian teacher herself. This change will not occur until she has allowed herself to move through each step of the coming out process which will guide her past previously embraced cultural hegemony to an understanding and acceptance of her own culture, resulting in profound personal change that will affect professional change. This does not imply that a lesbian teacher who is closeted cannot be a good teacher, possessing the positive attributes that are generally accepted by colleagues and students. However, by remaining closeted, students and colleagues will not be given the chance to realize that they know a good teacher who just happens to be a lesbian (Melillo, 2003, p. 18).

Throughout this research I have examined and sometimes contrasted the lives of six lesbian teachers in Nova Scotia and I feel it imperative to note, that at no time was my intent to position these teachers as victims. When a lesbian teacher manages her sexual identity, she often does so for fear of harassment, accusation, or vilification; but ultimately, this is a choice and a valid one at that. Her decision to not acknowledge her sexual identity may unwittingly contribute to the silence surrounding the lesbian subjectivities in school but this does not mean that she is powerless. As Ferfolja (2008), emphasizes,

Silence can be used to resist and disrupt. A lesbian teacher who chooses to remain 'closeted' is often perceived as suffering under heterosexual oppression; yet, simultaneously being closeted and passing as heterosexual challenges the normality and naturalness of heterosexuality, because the very act of being closeted reveals the fact that

heterosexuality is a social construction and performance. Thus, silencing is not always oppressive, but may function differently depending on the discursive context (p. 109).

When discussing the factors in their decision to remain silent, the women who are conditionally out often cited “professionalism” or “being a private person”, thus conveying this notion of choice. There is safety in silence; when a lesbian teacher remains closeted she is awarded the privilege of the hegemonic class. In my discussion surrounding school boards I asked one conditionally out woman if she felt that her sexuality changes her rank within the education system:

I think if you're a quiet gay person and you don't make that an issue, then it's not going to play into it, but if you are vocal and you believe things should be done a certain way I think that you fall lower in the rankings; they don't want people to make noise.

This perception that lesbian teachers should not “make noise” was a recurring theme in several conversations and it is terminal forms of power such as this that reinforce the discriminatory silence seen in schools. The choice to remain in educational closets has been viewed by many researchers as counterproductive, detrimental to human rights, and a perpetuating factor in the invisibility of all LGBTT persons (Blinick, 1994; Donahue, 2007; DeJean, 2007; Melillo, 2003).

Todd Jennings and Ian MacGillivray (2007) offer a unique perspective on this highly charged coming out debate in what they refer to as the *new victim narrative*, “an obvious take on the frequent portrayal of [LGBTT] youth as victims of a heterosexist and homophobic society, eminently at risk, lack agency and self-efficacy, and in need of protection and support” (p. 55). They propose that LGBTT educators are frequently excused from coming out if doing so has the

threat of harm. A unique feature of this narrative is the *threat* of harm versus the *proof* of harm. Therefore, “if fear is present, any expectation to come out is deflected and silenced” (p. 56) and their concern is that there is a renewed acceptance of remaining closeted. The purpose of their discussion is not to judge but to point out a potentially damaging situation that may arise in the LGBTT community as a result of this new victim narrative. It is Jennings’ and MacGillivray’s apprehension that internal ranking will occur on degrees of outness and levels of marginalization. They fear that the destructive nature of ranking will distract from the existing need for advocacy and ignore the rights gained by people coming out and demanding rights. This potential fracturing of the LGBTT community accentuates “the worry that if there is no expectation to come out, [will] governments or institutions have the obligation to recognize the diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities” (p. 57).

Throughout this research considerable time has been spent probing the imbalanced power relationships that exist between lesbian teachers and their students, colleagues, and the education system in general. Since the need for reform is so great, the focus of this investigation has been predominantly negative but it would be irresponsible and inaccurate to not acknowledge the positive aspects of these women’s lives and the empowerment they feel. I asked each woman how her sexuality affected her career as a teacher and the participants uniformly mentioned how it makes them more cautious in their interactions with students. Interestingly, all the participants cited their desire to work with youth when I asked them why they decided to become a teacher.

For the women who were publicly out, they were unable to separate their outness with their careers and used this opportunity to converse about the positive aspects of the daily lives as teachers. As a result I was able to extend the questioning to further examine the professional and personal impact of being publicly out.

When a teacher is publicly out she lives her life with what William DeJean (2007) labels *radical honesty*. If a lesbian teacher conducts her life based on the principals of radical honesty, she speaks using language that reveals the true nature of events, she includes her partner in school events “in the same fashion as their heterosexual colleagues [and] they participate in open and honest dialogues with their classes and individual students” (p. 63). In his examination of ten publicly out gay and lesbian teachers, DeJean argued that a commitment to *radical honesty* positively impacts the teacher and his or her students, classrooms, and community as a whole. Like DeJean’s participants, the women involved in this research reported feelings of liberation when they came out and they were eager to discuss the positive impact this decision had on themselves and their school community. I asked the women how being publicly out has affected their relationships with colleagues and their responses highlight the positive effect coming out and being proud can have on a school. As one participant explains, this was not her intent but it certainly was the result:

It’s interesting that you ask that because I wouldn’t have known this unless I was told about it, but because I was celebrating kind of coming into being with my own self, I’ve heard from other staff members who were not out with their own sexuality that it helped them come out. I had no idea, no idea of the impact because I was really, to be honest, really self-involved. I had no intention of truly making an impact at that time. I was just celebrating life, and then a few years later people saying “you know you did make an impact”, it was incredible. Then we started doing the International Day against Homophobia and those teachers of the gay and lesbian community started becoming a part of that and now hundred percent of those staff that I know of the gay or lesbian community are also out too.

When a lesbian teacher is out, proud, and accepted by her colleagues it affects many members of her school community. As one woman describes, when diversity is modelled its effects are powerful:

Coming out with the staff and being out with the staff and having a laugh with your staff around your own experiences; those staff [members] have thanked me. We have become friends over the years, and they said that it has impacted their parenting and impacted them in the classroom, to be friends with and to be close to someone who is gay or lesbian.

This sentiment of embodying diversity was repeated by another woman. It is also important to note that for her, coming out was significant in her political activism within her school:

Because I'm an out lesbian it's allowed some of my staff to come out and celebrate that, and I think part of that has been activities that we've put on for students. Diversity days, and because they see those things are celebrated, what we do for students has a direct impact on teachers. So I think that's been huge to see the number of students come out to see international day against homophobia, wearing a rainbow. I mean, I was right out there, and addressing questions like why are you doing this; and exposure, I believe that exposure; if I had that in school...I grew up in the eighties and nineties so I thought I grew up in a pretty liberal place. I just think if I was exposed earlier to diverse individuals then I would've been aware much earlier. But here we are now exposing and celebrating life and celebrating diversity; [it] tells people that it's okay to be themselves.

These women's comments illustrate the possibilities of leadership and activism that exist for lesbian teachers. A lesbian teacher does not have to be out to be active within her school

community but in terms of the women I spoke with, the phenomenon of fear that keeps them from coming out and managing their identity also keeps them silent. Of the women who are publicly out, they all actively work for human rights as proud lesbian teachers. Of great importance in these women's lives are their administrators who set the tone and lay a foundation that encourages them to feel safe. Each woman works in schools "that actively values inclusion, honors diversity, and insists on a culture of respect [that] creates a climate in which gay and lesbian educators are more freely able to teach authentically" (DeJean, 2007, p. 67).

Another woman stressed the importance of having lesbian allies on staff. She works at a school where all the lesbian teachers are publicly out and although she has a good working relationship with the entire staff, she especially appreciates these women:

I know that there [are women] that I can go to, there's about three or four on staff that I could really figure as being supportive. I feel very supported, I know who to talk to. I went through a really difficult time this year and it's really good to be able to talk to people who understand, who can empathize. I wish we had more of a showing, more of a diverse staff; because when you look at the women particularly on staff that are gay there isn't that many in the grand scheme of our staff, we have maybe three or four, I know there's other schools that have a bigger diversity than we do, so it would be nice to have that.

The women who are conditionally out often censored their personal lives when interacting with colleagues; this was not the case for the participants who were publicly out. Their partners accompanied them to staff functions and one woman commented that she has her partner's picture on her desk.

I asked one participant if she mentions her partner in conversations at work, her response had an air of cheerfulness:

Yeah all the time, I would probably talk more now about my partner than I ever have in the past about my [male] partners, because I'm happy and I want to share. You know, "we did this and [my partner] and I were laughing about it", because we do talk about each other.

For lesbian teachers the location and nature of the community in which they work often impacts their decision to come out and contributes to their feeling of safety. Typically teachers feel more comfortable in an urban setting (Khayatt, 1992). One participant had a perception and fear of rural communities that turned out to be unjustified:

Basically everything just kind of came out when I was at [a more urban setting], and then I went to a little farming community. I was a little worried going in there, but the kids were incredible because right from day one everybody knew that I had a girl friend and lived with a woman. I was always waiting for that comment and not once did that happen.

One teacher smiled as she discussed the relationship she had with her junior high students:

You get more and more comfortable of course every year, but I found that humour often just made them more comfortable. You know I would talk about the fact I couldn't draw a straight line [when teaching math], just those little things... things were stored in a cupboard there and I always call it "the closet"! Every now and then I would throw something out there and they'd look at each other first and then they'd just think it was the funniest thing. They'd ask me about my partner and they'd ask me just questions like they'd ask any teacher, I was lucky.

This comfort level was echoed by the other participants who discussed the joy they felt when interacting with students. Beyond the joy of teaching that these three women expressed, they lacked anxiety in their stories. All had experienced homophobia and none were naive concerning the vulnerable nature of the profession, yet they seemed at ease. For them, the personal impact of this commitment to radical honesty has freed up precious energy once spent hiding and being afraid, thus freeing themselves of angst as they expressed. As noted by one participant, her life changed drastically after coming out:

At the beginning, the first ten years, I had so much fear in the fact that if I am a lesbian I can't be a coach I can't be a teacher because no one will trust me. I was just so fearful of what might happen to me; I may end up losing my job, parents won't want me to work with their kids, so the first part was all fear based and I just couldn't deal with that. Then the second half of my career, the last fifteen or twenty years, or however long I've been teaching, it's been fantastic. The opportunities to impact my colleagues and kids that I've worked with and friends, it's been amazing.

This freeing of energy was also discussed by another woman:

I found that the more out I was and the more open and the less secretive, my god my life just became so easy, it was incredible, people had nothing to talk about anymore because there **was nothing** to talk about because you're right out there, it was amazing; because at one point I knew I was being talked about. Soon as I was out there, I took away all the power. Amazing, even the kids, as soon as you're straight forward with them that's it.

The last participant's point regarding power is an important one to be considered. She perceived her secrecy as dishonest. In turn, her deceit projected a message of transgression that

caused people to question her morals when in fact she had done nothing wrong. Once she embraced her lesbian identity and learned to love herself, she became empowered. As another participant wisely noted, “If you don’t like yourself, no one else will either. People treat you as you allow yourself to be treated”. The final question posed to each of the participants was, “Why did you choose to participate in this research?” Their responses have reaffirmed the worth of this research. Three women felt this research had the potential to raise awareness about the existence and needs of lesbian teachers. One participant viewed the research as advocacy:

I think it’s really important to support any research that’s done around gay and lesbian rights and homophobia. Anything that will advocate for teachers, that just makes life a little better and opens peoples’ eyes to what it’s like to be a lesbian, is good.

For another woman, her participation in this study was about being recognized:

I think it’s important for work to be done, because I think there are a lot of gay teachers...there’re a lot more gay teachers than people realise.

Understanding the relationship between sexuality and teaching was why one woman participated:

Because I think it’s good, I think it’s really important the experience of gay teachers. I think how we come at our teaching is a part of who we are and how it comes out in us is really interesting.

For one participant, the need for role models was critical in her decision to partake in this study:

I think it’s important. It’s something I’m very interested in, obviously I have a personal interest in it and professionally too. I think the main thing I’d like to see out of this is that

there are role models for the kids, because at the end of the day it's about the kids; but it's also about our happiness and our safety, but mostly what I'd like to see is that there are positive gay role models teachers out there so that the kids can identify can come out much earlier than they normally would...have a better teenage up bringing than I did.

One woman optimistically pointed out that inroads are being made and central to this progression is the importance of diversity:

I think we're progressing slowly, but we are progressing, and I think that we really do need to celebrate diversity, embrace diversity, and students need to see that we are a faction of society, and that we need to have a diverse staff, and the more that it is role modelled to students [the better].

Finally, the welfare of other lesbian teachers was cited as the reason why one woman agreed to be involved in this research:

I think that if it can help people become aware of the issues surrounding sexual orientation, or if it can help teachers understand that they're not alone, that there are others who can empathize and feel things that they may feel themselves. It's a sharing a building of professionalism, it's part of professional development and if it can play a part in advocating for lesbian and gay issues, then great. I think it just gives us an opportunity to reflect on our own experiences, and try and articulate our own journey which is really difficult when you go through it.

The voices and stories of lesbian teachers need to be heard; the positive experiences need to be celebrated, while the hateful nature of homophobia, and the fear that consumes valuable

energy are elements of a lesbian teacher's life that must be exposed and challenged. Silence is a form of discrimination, in that it renders lesbian teachers invisible and discounts their identity. This invisibility and silence also reinforces the suspicion that because their lifestyle does not fit the dominant norm that it is in some way repugnant. Furthermore, homophobia and invisibility are particularly damaging in that they divide all women thereby preventing them from supporting each other.

A lesbian does not have to be out to be a good teacher but she must feel free to come out should she choose. Any teacher who openly criticizes cultural norms in professionally risky situations can move students to open their minds and hearts to the issues faced by the LGBTTT community and diverse populations in general. If as educators we hope to eliminate oppression,

We have to challenge the structure of power as it is presently composed, to resist current hegemonic ideologies, and, in the case of homosexuality specifically, we have to call into question heterosexuality. Each one of us, as individuals and as teachers, must be (or become) consciously aware of our role as change agents, and, wherever possible, we must attempt to work together to achieve an equitable society. (Khayatt, 1994, p. 58).

For three of the women who participated in this research this challenge of power begins by coming out. Their presence, identity, and willingness to educate confront the status quo of hegemony on a daily basis.

Through the course of this research, listening to the chronicles of women's lives, I have experienced a gamut of emotions. As women discussed their fear, I was frustrated that energy is wasted when they have so much to give; while they spoke of homophobia, I felt anger that they could be unjustly accused and their immaculate careers so needlessly threatened; and when they spoke of the risks they took and how they advocated for youth, I was proud. It is apparent that

many aspects of schooling in Nova Scotia must change before all lesbian teachers can feel safe; I hope this work has somehow illuminated areas that desperately require reform. I would suggest that the merit of this research rests in its potential to encourage dialogue. In the second interview I conducted, my participant looked at me and said “I’d of like[d] to have a lesbian teacher come out and tell me all about it and tell me that it was great”; I hope this thesis and the voices represented does just that. As a researcher and a teacher the question still remains,

Why not welcome to the teaching profession anyone who respected the rights of others, is well informed, and communicates effectively, and who is dedicated to helping students realize their potential?...Let’s encourage the education establishment to recruit positive, sensitive, well-informed people. Then let’s dedicate the classroom to the elimination of ignorance, not to its perpetuation (Rowe, 2006, p. 208).

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Appendices

Appendix A

Letter of Invitation and Information

Dear _____,

Let me start by thanking you for expressing interest in participating in a qualitative study about the lives, careers, and experiences of lesbian teachers in Nova Scotia. As you are probably aware, there is only a small amount of work written about the lives and experiences of lesbian teachers, and even less specifically pertaining to those working in Nova Scotia.

This research and the subsequent thesis that follows will help me complete the final requirements for my Master of Arts in Education degree in Curriculum Studies at Mount Saint Vincent University. The purpose of this thesis is to create a space for the voices of lesbian teachers.

It is my goal to interview five women who have identified themselves as lesbians and worked or are working as a teacher in Nova Scotia. During these interviews I hope to learn about how your sexuality has impacted your life and experiences as a teacher. Although I have a set of specific questions that I would like to ask you (please see the attached sheet), I would rather that the interview is more open-ended and that you not feel bounded to only answering the pre-determined questions. The interviews will be done on an individual basis, one time, at a location of your choice. The length of the interviews may vary. However, it is expected that the interview will not exceed two hours. This time frame is not meant to restrict or obligate you, it is merely an estimate and ultimately the length will be determined by you, the participant.

Each interview will be taped and then transcribed by myself, verbatim. The tapes and consent forms will be kept in a secure location until they are transcribed and verified by you, the participant. Once transcribed and verified, the tapes and consent forms will be destroyed. The interview transcription will contain no identifying features and the files will be encrypted and password protected.

Please note, should you disclose any information pertaining to the current abuse or neglect of a child, as a teacher in Nova Scotia, under section 22 of the *Children and Family Services Act*, I am legally bounded to report any incident to the appropriate authorities. It should also be noted that in Canada it is illegal for an adult (someone over 18 years of age) to engage in a sexual relationship with a person under the age of 16. Such incidents will also be reported to appropriate authorities.

Your participation in this project will be according to your wishes; that is, it can be completely anonymous, any or all of your comments can be attributed to you, and/or your participation acknowledged if so desired. This is not a decision you must make immediately or without information. Once the interviews have been transcribed they will be sent to you so you can confirm accuracy, clarify comments, and add or delete information. Please also be aware that you may decline or withdraw your participation in this study at any time and should you choose to do so any collected data and consent forms will be destroyed. I anticipate that no harm will come from the completion of, or your involvement in this study. At no time during this study will you be asked to waive any legal rights.

I will be calling you within the next two weeks to discuss a possible interview time. Should you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me at 423-4085 (home) or at 483-9240 (cell). If you have questions about how this study is being conducted and wish to speak

with someone who is not directly involved in the study, you may contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board (UREB) c/o MSVU Research and International Office, at 457-6350 or via e-mail at research@msvu.ca. If you require further information pertaining to this study, you may contact Dr. Valda Leighteizer, Thesis Supervisor, at (902) 457-6184 or at valda.leighteizer@msvu.ca. If at any time you require the assistance of a counselling service one is available through the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU) free of charge at (902) 477-5621. If you do choose to participate in the study please sign below, and read and sign the additional consent forms attached. Thank you again for your time and participation.

Date: _____

Name (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Sincerely,

Victoria Best

Appendix B

Interview Consent Form

I _____, agree to participate in a research study about the lives, careers, and experiences of lesbian teachers in Nova Scotia. This interview will be conducted by Victoria Best, a master's graduate student in the Master's of Arts in Education focusing on Curriculum Studies at Mount Saint Vincent University.

I understand that Victoria Best will interview me and will ask questions relating to my personal experiences as a lesbian, a teacher in the public school system in Nova Scotia, and how my sexuality impacts my experiences.

I agree to allow the researcher, Victoria Best, to voice record the interview. I understand that I may refuse to answer any question during the interview and that I may withdraw my participation in this study at any time in which case I retain ownership of the material and any collected data and consent forms will be destroyed. The audio recordings will be stored in a secure location and destroyed once transcribed. The subsequent transcriptions will be stored on the researcher's computer as encrypted and password protected files.

I will be provided with the initial copy of the transcribed interview and will have the opportunity to confirm accuracy, clarify comments, and add or delete information.

I understand that I may remain completely anonymous if so desired in the publishing of any or all portions of the transcribed interview. I may also agree to have any or all my comments attributed to me and/or my participation recognized.

I understand that the researcher, Victoria Best, will not report any information that may identify me or disclose my participation in this study, unless I choose to have my participation acknowledged.

I understand that the results and portions of the interview will appear in Victoria Best's thesis for completion of a master's degree which subsequently will be available on loan at the Mount Saint Vincent Library.

I understand that if the researcher, Victoria Best, wants to use this information in any way other than described here, I will be asked for permission at that time.

I understand that should I disclose any information pertaining to the abuse or neglect, of a child, under section 22 of the *Children and Family Services Act*, the researcher, Victoria Best, is legally responsible to report such incident to the appropriate authorities. I also understand that in Canada it is illegal for an adult (someone over 18 years of age) to engage in a sexual relationship with a person under the age of 16 and should I disclose any information pertaining to such a relationship, the researcher, Victoria Best, is legally responsible to report such incident to the appropriate authorities.

If I require further information pertaining to this study, I may contact Dr. Valda Leighteizer, Thesis Supervisor, at (902) 457-6184 or at valda.leighteizer@msvu.ca.

If I have questions about how this study is being conducted and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved in the study, I may contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board (UREB) c/o MSVU Research and International Office, at 457-6350 or via e-mail at research@msvu.ca. If at any time I require the assistance of a counselling service, one is available through the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU) free of charge at (902) 477-5621.

I (wish / do not wish) to have my participation remain anonymous.

Date: _____

Name (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Appendix C

Voice Recording Consent Form

I _____, agree to participate in a research study about the lives, careers, and experiences of lesbian teachers in Nova Scotia. This interview will be conducted by Victoria Best, a master's graduate student in the Master's of Arts in Education focusing on Curriculum Studies at Mount Saint Vincent University.

I understand that Victoria Best will interview me and will ask questions relating to my personal experiences as a lesbian, a teacher in the public school system in Nova Scotia, and how my sexuality impacts my experiences.

I agree to allow the researcher, Victoria Best, to voice record the interview. I understand that I may refuse to answer any question during the interview and that I may withdraw my participation in this study at any time in which case I retain ownership of the material and any collected data and consent forms will be destroyed. The audio recordings will be stored in a secure location and destroyed once transcribed. The subsequent transcriptions will be stored on the researcher's computer as encrypted and password protected files.

I will be provided with the initial copy of the transcribed interview and will have the opportunity to confirm accuracy, clarify comments, and add or delete information.

I understand that I may remain completely anonymous if so desired in the publishing of any or all portions of the transcribed interview. I may also agree to have any or all my comments attributed to me and/or my participation recognized.

I understand that the researcher, Victoria Best, will not report any information that may identify me or disclose my participation in this study, unless I choose to have my participation acknowledged.

I understand that the results and portions of the interview will appear in Victoria Best's thesis for completion of a master's degree which subsequently will be available on loan at the Mount Saint Vincent Library.

I understand that if the researcher, Victoria Best, wants to use this information in any way other than described here, I will be asked for permission at that time.

I understand that should I disclose any information pertaining to the abuse or neglect, of a child, under section 22 of the *Children and Family Services Act*, the researcher, Victoria Best, is legally responsible to report such incident to the appropriate authorities. I also understand that in Canada it is illegal for an adult (someone over 18 years of age) to engage in a sexual relationship with a person under the age of 16 and should I disclose any information pertaining to such a relationship, the researcher, Victoria Best, is legally responsible to report such incident to the appropriate authorities.

If I require further information pertaining to this study, I may contact Dr. Valda Leighteizer, Thesis Supervisor, at (902) 457-6184 or at valda.leighteizer@msvu.ca.

If I have questions about how this study is being conducted and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved in the study, I may contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board (UREB) c/o MSVU Research and International Office, at 457-6350 or via e-mail at research@msvu.ca. If at any time I require the assistance of a counselling service, one is available through the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU) free of charge at (902) 477-5621. I (wish / do not wish) to have my participation remain anonymous.

Date: _____

Name (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Appendix D

Proposed Interview Questions

The interview questions proposed below will be used as a guide to help frame our dialogue and provide some consistency between interviews. However, these questions are only guidelines and I hope if there is anything else you wish to discuss during our meeting you feel comfortable enough to do so. Please note, if there are any particular questions that you are not comfortable answering, that right will be understood and respected. Also, at any time you may withdraw from this study and any collected data and consent forms will be destroyed.

Part A: Background Information

1. Let's begin by having you tell me a little about yourself.
2. Tell me about your process of recognizing your sexual identity.
 - a) Can you describe how and when you realized that you were attracted to women?
 - b) To whom are you "out"? Tell me about this progression.

Part B: Professional Experiences

3. Why did you become a teacher?
4. Did you consider your sexual orientation and how it may impact your choice of profession?
5. How does your sexual orientation affect your life as an educator?
6. Have you experienced homophobia or heterosexism in your profession? If so, what does this "look like"? Is it subtle or blatant?

7. Tell me about the relationships you have with the people in your school community (colleagues, administration, parents, and students).
 - a) Are you “out” to your colleagues? If so, how did this happen?
 - b) Do you feel supported in your school? If so, how? If not, why?
 - c) Are there people who you consider allies or supportive?
 - d) How do you think you are perceived by members of your school community?
 - e) Does your school have a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA)? If so, who runs it?
 - f) Are there other teachers at your school who are members of the LGBTTT community?
8. Does your sexuality ever affect the way you dress or express yourself? If yes, how so?

Part C: Teachers As Role Models

9. Do you consider yourself to be a positive role model for your students? Why do you feel this way?
10. How does your sexuality affect your position as a leader or role model?
11. Is your school setting safe or conducive to being “out” and a role model? If so, how?

Part D: Human Rights and the Lindsay Willow Tribunal

12. Are you familiar with the human rights tribunal involving Lindsay Willow and the Halifax Regional School Board?
13. Did the tribunal, and the subsequent media coverage, ever create conversations among the staff at your school? If so, were you ever involved in these conversations and what was the topic of the discussion? In your opinion, did the environment at your school change during this time?

14. How did this event personally affect you?
15. Do you think school boards and unions treat all its members equally? Can you explain why you feel this way?

Part E: Creating a Safer Space

16. What can be done to make the education system a safe place for lesbian teachers?
17. What does “being safe” mean for you?
18. If you were to offer advice to a lesbian planning on becoming a teacher, what would it be?
19. Why did you choose to participate in this study?

Appendix E

Additional Probe or Prompt Questions

1. How do you identify yourself (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgendered, or any combination)?
2. What does “being out” mean to you?
3. Do you think that coming out is something you do once? Can you explain your answer?
4. Have any of your colleagues ever questioned your sexuality? If so, how did you respond and how did this experience make you feel?
5. If you are not “out”, what practices do you employ to conceal your sexual orientation?
6. Are there conversations that you avoid because of your sexuality?
7. Have you ever avoided staff functions because of your sexuality?
8. How does your sexual orientation affect the relationship you have with your students?
9. In your daily interactions with students, are there physical things you do or consider because of your sexuality?
10. If a student were to “come out” to you how would you respond?
11. Do you think it is important for your students to know that you are a lesbian (or however self-identified)? Why is this important? Do you think it is equally important for heterosexual and homosexual students?
12. What attributes make a good role model?
13. Do you think what happened to Lindsay Willow could happen to you? If so, why?
14. Have you ever felt like a target because of your sexuality?
15. Do you feel that you can safely advocate for of other LBTT teachers or students? Why or why not?