

# When Truths Collide: Christian Privilege Undermines Freedom of Identity in Canadian Public Schools

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*The conflict between freedom of religion and freedom of identity and expression in schools remains a controversial topic internationally. As primarily socializing agents, schools reproduce the cultural norms of the communities within which they are embedded. When schools are situated in environments with high levels of religiosity that are non-affirming to gender and sexually diverse youth, the impact is felt within the lived curriculum of individual students. Using narrative inquiry, this study explored this impact and student perceptions of how freedom of religion became a means to justify discrimination and oppression of sexual and gender diverse students and promoted feelings of insecurity and isolation amongst this marginalized group.*

*Le conflit entre la liberté de religion et la liberté d'identité et d'expression dans les écoles demeure un sujet de controverse à l'échelle internationale. En tant que principaux agents de socialisation, les écoles reproduisent les normes culturelles des communautés dans lesquelles elles sont intégrées. Lorsque les écoles sont situées dans des environnements à haut niveau de religiosité qui ne sont pas favorables à la diversité sexuelle et de genre des jeunes, l'impact est ressenti dans le curriculum vécu de chaque élève. En utilisant une enquête narrative, cette étude a exploré cet impact et les perceptions des élèves sur la façon dont la liberté de religion est devenue un moyen de justifier la discrimination et l'oppression des élèves sexuellement et sexuellement différents et a favorisé les sentiments d'insécurité et d'isolement parmi ce groupe marginalisé.*

It is uncontested that pervasive systems of privilege and oppression create differential treatment, experiences, and access across institutions and social systems. Through the power these systems hold, rules around acceptable behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs, including what is discussed, challenged, and questioned, are enforced and reinforced. Christian privilege is one example of a societal and institutionally supported form of power that is routinely left uninterrupted, creating inequitable experiences for non-Christian identities. Schlosser (2003) attested that discussing Christian privilege is breaking a sacred taboo because both subtle and obvious pressures exist to ensure that certain privileges continue to be ascribed to Christians. Christian privilege refers to the unearned, invisible, and largely unacknowledged array of benefits accorded to Christians (Blumenfeld, 2006). Schools have been well documented as sites of Christian privilege, through the marginalization of non-believers or other faith communities in curricular materials which focus on the heroes, holidays, traditions, accomplishments, and importance of a Christian experience (Blumenfeld, 2006). Schlosser (2003) drew attention to the influence of Christian

privilege on the oppression of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, based on the encoding of Christian religious beliefs and doctrine into laws that brand gender and sexual diversity as immoral.

As primarily socializing agents, schools reproduce the society and culture in which they are embedded, and reflect and contribute back to the dynamics of the social structure (Kedley, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2014). As a consequence, it is a common practice of schools to reproduce cultural and religious norms, often with the inequalities and privileges of the larger society with which they are surrounded (Blumenfeld, 2006; Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Collins, 2009). Yep (2003) asserted schools participate in the process of normalization, which is the process of constructing, establishing, producing, and reproducing a taken-for-granted and all-encompassing standard used to measure goodness, desirability, morality, rationality, superiority, and a host of other dominant cultural values. Warner (1993) called normalization the “site of violence” (p. xxvi) and Yep (2003) contended that one of the most powerful forms of normalization in Western social systems is heteronormativity. Heteronormativity refers to the belief that heterosexuality is the normal, natural, and ideal form of sexuality. Heteronormativity also fosters a belief that there is one ideal form of male and female, thus supporting a gender binary and privileges the expression of true masculinity and femininity. Heteronormativity fosters systemic disadvantages for gender and sexual minorities because it confers all social and cultural advantages to heterosexuals and gender-conforming individuals (Nunn & Bolt, 2015). Heterosexism is an ideology that not only privileges heterosexuality but also actively degrades and punishes any alternative, non-heterosexual and non-heteronormative relationships, identities, and behaviors (Nunn & Bolt, 2015).

### **Literature Overview**

A number of education scholars have commented on the reproduction of the belief that heterosexuality is the only normal and viable option that is perpetuated in schools (Callaghan, 2009, 2015, 2016; Kehily, 2002; Kosciw et al., 2014). Kumashiro (2000) pointed out conservative religious groups are gaining more and more influence over education, helping to develop and impose standards that prescribe what students are to learn, and even, how teachers are to teach. It is important here to be conscious of the difference between affirming religions and those opposed to sexual and gender diversity. Grace et al. (2004) differentiated between “no-heart Christians...who fuel a Queer/straight binary of indifference with their dismissal, denial, or disregard of those they other as deviant fags” (p. 313) and “brave-heart Christians .... who engage in political and pedagogical community work to achieve space and place for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender [LGBT] persons” (p. 313). Gattis et al. (2014) found students who belonged to religious denominations that supported gender and sexual diversity saw their religion as a protective factor, yet those who were affiliated with religions that discriminated against gender and sexual diversity had more negative psychological consequences.

Examining the impact of non-affirming faith beliefs on the experiences of students is particularly relevant during adolescence, a stage immersed in identity exploration, development, and sometimes crises. Identity, referring to the social categories individuals claim membership to, and the personal meanings associated with these memberships (Ashmore et al., 2004) is a critical developmental task of adolescence and is strongly influenced by a myriad of systems and cultural contexts (Erikson, 1968). At this stage, adolescents work to integrate multiple identities, including gender identity and sexuality, into an overall sense of self (Baumeister, 1998), which is true of all youth across the gender and sexuality spectrum. It is at this time that an intensification

of the awareness around gender and gender differences occurs as a result of the dynamic interaction of biological, cognitive, and social changes that accentuate an awareness around gender identity (Juntunen & Schwartz, 2016). Successful integration of multiple aspects of identity, such as gender and sexual orientation identity, and the ability to disclose their identity authentically publicly, set adolescents on a trajectory for positive resolution of adult identity issues and developmental tasks that present later in life (Erikson, 1968; Legate et al., 2017). However, a lack of identity integration can result in mental health challenges throughout adolescence and beyond (Newton & Mustanski, 2010; Rosario et al., 2009; Rosario et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2010; Swann & Spivy, 2004).

A growing body of literature has highlighted the unique challenges related to intersectionality of identities (Carragher & Rivers, 2002; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Morrow, 2012; Weber, 1998) faced by gender and sexually diverse adolescents, who may simultaneously encounter systemic oppression on the basis of heterosexism, sexism, and cisgenderism, as they navigate their gender and sexual orientation identity development (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2009; Young & Meyer, 2005). There are many influences on the development and integration of a gender and sexual orientation identity, including societal expectations (Tobin et al., 2010), media (Signorielli, 2001; Ward et al., 2005), peers (Tobin et al., 2010) and family (Crouter et al., 2007; Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2002). Despite some variability in theories of identity development, it has been unanimously supported by identity researchers and scholars that there is a social connection and influence to individual identity development and the developmental process for gender and sexually diverse adolescents is uniquely challenging due to broadly accepted and enacted normative discourses of gender and sexuality (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; D'Augelli, 1994; Lev, 2004). Given the systemic and societal influences on identity development and the unique experiences of gender and sexually diverse youth (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; D'Augelli, 1994; Lev, 2004), further study is needed on the impact of non-affirming faith discourse of this population.

The field of educational research is only just beginning to include studies that explore the conflict of religion and gender and sexual diversity, with few studies having examined the impact of religiosity on the school experiences of sexual minority and gender minority students (Stewart et al., 2015). Many of the studies that do exist focused on the experiences of students within religiously affiliated schools (Callaghan, 2009, 2015, 2016). This study was unique in that it explored the religious impact on students attending public, secular, non-religiously affiliated schools in the context of a conservative area in rural Southern Alberta, Canada. Rural Southern Alberta is well known for its conservative attitudes and beliefs and is considered by many to be the bible belt of Canada. Amongst other faiths, Alberta is home to 81,000 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), which is nearly half of the country's total membership (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, [CJCLDS], 2016). Like other Christian denominations, the LDS church has been highlighted as historically and continually intolerant of same sex attractions and sexual behaviors (Dahl & Galliher, 2012).

The LDS church and their teachings are drawn into this research study to serve as an example of the experience of attending non-denominational schools embedded in communities with a large population of members of a non-affirming faith towards gender and sexual diversity. Christian privilege operates in many of the schools in rural sections of Alberta, Canada, in which the LDS church is authorized to offer its seminary teachings as a credited option course within non-denominational public schools. LDS church officials, who may or may not be registered teachers, instruct the LDS seminary course during regular school hours, off-campus at an LDS

church, and for credits towards a provincially granted high school diploma. The seminary teachings of the LDS faith support discrimination towards gender and sexual minority individuals. For instance, the LDS Church pamphlet called *The Family: A proclamation to the world* (CJCLDS, 1995), proclaimed:

Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan. Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity ... we warn that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets. (p. 1)

This pamphlet remains a teaching tool in the updated 2015 *LDS Seminary Teacher Manual* (CJCLDS, 2015) included in the curriculum of schools in rural Southern Alberta. This study aimed to capture the lived experiences of current secondary students, navigating the landscape of public secular schools embedded in communities with high levels of non-affirming religiosity.

Aligned with critical theory, this research followed the supposition that human nature operates in a world that is based on the struggle for power, which leads to interactions of privilege and oppression that is built on many forms of diversity, including race, socioeconomic class, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, and ability (Bernal, 2002; Giroux, 2001; Kilgore, 2001; Lincoln et al., 2011). Following Foucault and other critical scholars, this research is concerned with the relation between social institutions and the individual, where power is located and operates most clearly (Butler, 1999; Mills, 2003). This research employed a social justice lens, in the tradition of emancipation and democracy in education, involving an ongoing effort to question school policies, curriculum, and institutional practices that support inequalities (Lund, 2011; Tilley & Taylor, 2013). Critical pedagogy is useful to social justice educational researchers because it exposes the continued reproduction of hegemonic or pervasive ideologies, simultaneously questioning individual and structural conditions that influence the possibilities of a just education (Freire 1970; Giroux, 2001; Hinchey 2008; Tilley & Taylor, 2013). Grounded in a critical theoretical perspective, this research revolved around a concern to examine social structures, oppression, and power and control, as they specifically relate to heteronormativity, heterosexism, and cisgenderism (Merriam, 2002).

This research set out to explore the ways dominant structural forces (i.e., educational institutions) unfairly privilege some individuals and marginalize others, like those with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations (Tilley & Taylor, 2013). A primary intellectual goal of this research was to explore the influence of this force in combination with other forces, namely religion, as it plays out on the lived experiences of secondary students and their developing identities, attitudes, and well-being. Biesta (2013) proclaimed it is the task of critical science to make visible these relations, which generally remain hidden from everyday view. Beyond giving an account of society and behavior, critical theory aspires to realize a society based on equality and democracy for all members (Cohen et al., 2011).

Aligned with critical theory, this research was taken up through a narrative inquiry approach, which prioritized a collaborative partnership with participants based on equality of power and esteem (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cohen et al., 2011; Josselson, 2013), looking to the student experiences as the ultimate source of validation of knowledge about the current realities in their school contexts. Fredman et al. (2015) pointed out students are the audience most receptive to the importance and relevance of addressing topics pertaining to gender and sexuality in school, but their voices are primarily unrepresented in the research. For precisely this reason, narrative

inquiry was employed for this study in an effort to capture the lived experiences of current secondary students.

### **Method**

This study engaged a multi-method qualitative approach, which involved narrative interviews and critical discourse analysis (Foucault, 1972; Gee, 1990; Gee, 2010; Luke, 1996) of relevant curricular materials (Surette, 2019). Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is frequently turned to in an effort to answer questions about the relationship between language and society (Rogers et al., 2005). Critical discourse analysis focuses on how language, as a cultural tool, mediates relationships of power and privilege in social interactions, institutions, and bodies of knowledge (Rogers et al., 2005).

The discourse of institutional life, such as schools, can be viewed as a means for the naturalization and disguise of power relations tied to inequalities (Luke, 1996). Critical discourse analysis was used to analyze how certain curriculum texts and documents worked to normalize and disguise heterosexism and the oppression of gender and sexual minority students. The analysis of curriculum texts followed Gee's (2010) model of CDA which involves a set of connection building activities that include describing, interpreting, and explaining the relationship between language use within curriculum materials pertaining to sexual and gender diversity along with the cultural models and situated meanings in the context of heteronormativity (Gee, 2010). What made the analysis of these curriculum documents critical was an interest to speak to, and ideally, intervene in the social problems, issues, and controversies pertaining to heteronormativity (Gee, 2010).

This article focuses on the narrative analysis from the narrative interviews as they relate to the influence of religiosity on the lived experiences of gender and sexual minority students. There are multiple conceptualizations of narrative inquiry. The approach to this study aligned with the narrative inquiry methodology conceptualized by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), which was developed from Dewey's theory of experience, which he considered the fundamental ontological category from which all inquiry proceeds (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). These processes of inquiry prioritize explorations initiated from lived experience, which unfold through dialogue. Closely connected to other post-structuralist and Marxist forms of inquiry, narrative inquiry is differentiated in the study of experience as it is lived (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007), which is the primary site of interest for this study. From this conceptualization, narrative inquiry begins with an ontology of experience, and reality is conceptualized as relational, temporal, and continuous (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued that narrative is the best way of understanding and representing experience because experience happens narratively.

Aligned with Clandinin and Rosiek's (2007) notion of the narrative inquirer, the individual's lived experiences are privileged as sources of insights, useful beyond the individual themselves and pertinent to the larger field of social science scholarship, with lived experiences positioned as the ultimate source of validation for knowledge (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). This research was not only interested in how individual students experience the lived curriculum pertaining to heteronormativity and freedom of religion, but what they made of it, and how, in turn, this enhanced or limited what they made of themselves.

## Data Collection

This study employed purposive sampling techniques (Maxwell, 1997). The population of interest for this study was secondary students, between the grades of 9 through 12, that were currently attending a public non-denominational school in rural Southern Alberta within communities highly populated with members of a non-affirming faith. Two separate school divisions granted access to their student population for recruitment for this study. Within these two divisions, seven schools were requested, and of those seven schools, five administrators agreed to have their school participate. Two administrators declined participation out of fear of backlash from parents and the community. Resultantly, five schools were sites for this study, however, participants were only obtained through 3 of the 5 schools, with 2 schools having no self-identified students requesting to participate. Students across the gender and sexuality spectrum were invited to participate, but participation required signed parental consent, which was a requirement of the school divisions who agreed to participate in this study, and a practice which aligned with the best practices for research involving partially dependent persons (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017). Recruitment involved all teachers reading a script to their entire class, at the same time, on a selected day. Posters were put up around the school and students were encouraged to contact the researcher directly. Six participants contacted the researcher and met the criteria for participation. The six participants ranged in age from 14 to 17 years old. All six participants identified as Caucasian and Canadian born. At the time of participation, two participants identified as transgender and four identified as cisgender. Pertaining to sexual orientation identity, two participants identified as bisexual, two as pansexual, one as queer, and one as heterosexual and an ally.

Students were invited to participate in multiple one-to-one open-ended interviews. Interviews were kept invitational and participant led and aimed for rich, nuanced, storied samples of subjectivity to discover how it has felt to live the life the participants have had in relation to living within a heteronormative school environment (Josselson, 2013). After the first interview, students were invited to participate in a second interview. Five of the six participants partook in a second interview, with two of the participants requesting a third interview. A total of 13 interviews were conducted, totalling 12.3 interview hours. All interviews were audio recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim (Maxwell, 2005). All students were asked to select a pseudonym and this replaced their name on all transcripts.

Qualitative research relies on various criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To increase the credibility, dependability, and transferability of this study, member checking (Merriam, 2002), triangulation of data (Cohen et al., 2011; Merriam, 2002), and self-reflexive writing (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Josselson, 2013) were enacted. The initial analysis involved creating narrative vignettes, which were returned to the participants for member checking to ensure accuracy of their accounts and in an effort to avoid over interpretation of their stories.

## Data Analysis

Kim (2016) used the term flirtation when discussing the data analysis and interpretation of narrative research, which asks us to undo our commitment to what we already know and question its legitimacy. Kim (2016) asserted “flirting with ideas allows us to dwell on what is unconvincing,

uncertain, perplexing, rendering surprises and serendipities, and of course disappointments as well” (p. 187). This process creates a space where research can reach new possibilities and cultivate ideas for finding new stories. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) asserted, the process of moving from field text to research text is very complex, involving many hours of reading and re-reading field texts to construct chronicled or summarized accounts and begin to narratively code the field texts. They contended that questions of meaning and social significance ultimately shape field texts into research texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Through repeated questioning around meaning and significance, the interview transcripts were transformed to research texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), with a focus on how the forces of heteronormativity and non-affirming religiosity influenced the day-to-day realities and experiences of secondary students in public high schools in rural Southern Alberta. The narrative interviews were read and re-read through the lens of these influences. However, aligned with Kim’s (2016) notion of flirtation, the transcripts were revisited multiple times during the data analysis stage, looking for new, surprising, and unique findings.

The results shared in this article were obtained through analysis of narratives. Analysis of narratives, also called the paradigmatic mode of analysis, attempts to fit individual details into a larger pattern (Kim, 2016). The process of analysis involved what Miles and Huberman (1994) termed “progressive refocusing”, which allowed for continual and deeper investigation to be conducted, as new data was collected and considered in light of previously collected data. This was engaged through early transcription of the interviews and careful reading and re-reading of the interviews multiple times before the second interviews were conducted. Through this analysis, common themes were discovered and organized under several categories using stories as data (Kim, 2016). Interview transcripts were uploaded to a computer assisted qualitative data analysis program, NVivo, and thematic categories were found and refined for shared experiences across participants, repeated encounters of heteronormativity within and between narratives, as well as unique observations and experiences within individual accounts (Owen, 1984). Following the primary coding, secondary coding involved re-reading of transcripts to further refine, combine, and elaborate upon the themes identified in the first phase of coding and organizing the results into subthemes. In keeping with constant comparison, encouraged in the process of thematic analysis, the relevant literature informed the coding and analysis continuously throughout this analysis phase (Charmez, 2000).

Narrative not only conveys information, but it brings it to life (Cohen et al., 2011). Keeping in line with narrative analysis, the results section to follow contains a substantial number of direct quotes in an effort to continue to capture and explore the themes through the experiences shared in the participants’ stories. A number of verbatim quotes are incorporated to add life and convey the point without being mediated or softened by academic language (Cohen et al., 2011). Through this process, the text and content are kept together, retaining the integrity of the participants, rather than fragmenting them into common themes or codes (Cohen et al., 2011).

## **Results**

The results shared in this article centre on one of the primary findings from the analysis of narratives as it pertained to the influence of heteronormativity on the lived experiences of public-school students in conservative areas with high levels of non-affirming religiosity. Three themes are used to organize the findings: (a) students describe how Christian privilege is experienced and prioritized over their freedom of identity; (b) non-affirming religious beliefs are perceived by

students as justification of homophobia and transphobia; (c) gender and sexual minority students experience of and reaction to the internalization of the normative discourse of heterosexism, sexism, and cisgenderism.

### **Christian Privilege is Present and Prioritized Over Freedom of Identity**

Throughout the interviews, Christian privilege came up in the context of the participants' perception that freedom of religion was more important than freedom of identity in their schools. In other words, the religious beliefs held by many of their peers and their families, as well as some of their teachers, which were unanimously identified as non-affirming, were perceived as directly contradicting the respect for diversity of gender and sexuality. Dana, a grade 9 student who identified at the time of the interview as transgender and pansexual, shared her feeling that "everyone here takes freedom of religion over freedom of stuff you can't change." Three of the participants felt this was the reason teachers were so cautious or unwilling to talk about anything related to gender and sexual diversity in the classroom. For instance, Dana articulated:

I think it goes back to the freedom of religion thing. You don't want to piss anyone off so you are just going to leave it. I get your religion is important to you, but so is my right to be who I am. This the biggest part of my identity and is who I am, what I identify as, so that takes priority over whether or not you think there is a God.

Nicole, a grade 9 cisgender and bisexual student, also felt religion had a role to play in why teachers were resistant to engage this topic in the classroom:

I feel that teachers kind of bunch it in there with the religion thing. Where it's like separation of church and state and also this because it's awkward and intermingles with this other. And so we are not going to talk about it because it's going to be awkward and we can't share our viewpoints on things with students.

What the participants' commentary illustrate is a perception that the topic of gender and sexual diversity is not avoided strictly on the basis of personal beliefs, but educators are cautious about providing information that contradicts religious beliefs.

Five of the six participants indicated the only time they had ever heard a teacher talk about gender or sexual diversity in their classroom was when they read out the advertisement for the current study. Despite unanimously acknowledging they had never heard conversations specifically addressing the respect of individuals who identified as a gender or sexual minority, a number of the participants could recall multiple times they had encountered explicit religiously infused lectures and content within their non-denominational public-school experiences. Rosie, a grade 10 student who identified as cisgender and heterosexual, recalled numerous instances religion was taught in her earlier school years. Rosie expressed confusion that the reason she had been given by her teacher to not address gender and sexual diversity topics was because it's a public school:

I don't get the whole public school thing. They're allowed to talk about religion in public school. When I was in elementary school, I went to a public elementary school and they had bible time every day. When I was in grade 5, in middle school, they brought someone to give out copies of the New Testament and brought the classes to the foyer for that and they let these people give a presentation, and so, it's



like these people can give a presentation on the bible in a public school, but you can't give a presentation on homophobia in a public school. Because it's a public school?

Rosie also recollected being directly shut down by a teacher when she wanted to engage in a presentation on marriage equality for her grade 8 social studies class in a unit on human rights:

When I was in grade 8, we were supposed to write speeches to present to the UN and I wanted to choose equal rights for queer people for my issue and my teacher said I couldn't because it was a public school.

No religious class was offered at the high school Dana attended, but she remembered her elementary school had an optional religious class. She also could remember times in her education that she had to learn about religion in class, but yet pointed out "if you have no problem teaching us about religion, why do you have such a problem teaching us about LGBT stuff?" These instances highlight some teachers intentionally safeguarding their classrooms from important conversations pertaining to diversity in an effort to avoid controversy or possible backlash from parents or the community. When considered in light of the permeability of the classroom to discussions around religion, and specifically Christian doctrine, this practice upholds Christian privilege while contradicting student's rights to an inclusive school environment that respects diversity.

### **Non-affirming Religious Discourse Justifies Homophobia and Transphobia**

The participants also shared the perspective that religion was used as a justification for why teachers didn't address the commonplace derogatory, homophobic, and transphobic language in school. All six participants identified homophobic and transphobic slurs were commonplace, occurring on a daily basis, but were rarely, if ever, addressed by their teachers. They felt their teachers and peers had become so desensitized to this language, it either went unnoticed or no one saw it worthy of addressing. However, Elisabeth, a grade 9 student who identified as bisexual and cisgender, could recall her teachers noticing and addressing language that may be deemed offensive to someone who is religious:

It's weird because there have been times when someone will say "oh my god" and you hear a teacher out of nowhere say "don't use that", but I don't know if I have ever seen a teacher really actually say something to a student that calls another student gay.

The participants discussed seeing the religious beliefs that were predominant in the areas in which they resided to be contradictory to the respect for diversity related to gender and sexuality. For Dana, her experience was that the few times her teachers did address the homophobic and transphobic language by peers, it was in a misinformed and harmful manner. She recalled her teacher telling her peers not to call someone a fag because they have to respect everyone's beliefs. Dana recounted her reaction to feeling like her teacher was perpetuating a discourse that gender and sexuality was a belief, or a choice: "They think it is such a belief, but then, why is it any different than your belief? It's not a belief. It's who I am." Elisabeth also talked about her peers taking aspects of the religious teachings that are sanctioned at school and using them as justification for the mistreatment of gender and sexually diverse individuals:

People here take one line from the bible and then just blow it up into a big thing and people who aren't good with change or don't understand it, just use that to their ability to just spread it around. If they are not taught to keep their opinions to themselves, then it comes out and, often times, opinions become hateful.

Religion came up frequently in our discussions over the course of the interviews and the participants all felt its presence in the classroom, in the hallways, in their interactions with peers, and in the curriculum. What was interesting was their awareness of this influence despite, for most of them, having no religious upbringing. However, just by nature of their school being embedded in communities with high levels of non-affirming religiosity, this discourse was pervasive in their schools and impacting their experience of safety and inclusion related to identity.

### **Internalized Heterosexism, Sexism, and Cisgenderism**

Religion emerged across the interviews as having a strong presence and influence on the climate and environment at school. For three of the participants, there was an internalization of this pressure to conform that resulted from their own involvement in religion as children. These three participants all talked about their experiences, while involved in a non-affirming faith, that gender and sexual diversity was not even an option and they each fought against innate desires and aspects of their identity due to the pressure to be something else. For Elisabeth, she felt this pressure as an elementary student attending a Catholic elementary school. She recalled her experiences as early as grade 2 with the internalization of the norms that anything other than heterosexual was not an option. Nicole felt a similar pressure to conform to the standards at her Catholic school where she attended up until grade six. For both Nicole and Elisabeth, these experiences happened while attending two different publicly funded Catholic elementary schools. Alternatively, Hunter, a grade 12 cisgender and queer student, had always attended a secular public school, but the struggle with the internalization of the scriptures and teachings of her LDS faith had a more profound impact, resulting in substantial emotional distress, including panic attacks and self-harm, and eventually, needing to leave the church. She recalled how sexual diversity was discussed within her faith:

Growing up, I was taught that it was bad, so having not ever experienced it or hearing about it, I was like okay, that's bad. It's mentioned as the basis understanding, you know, if you kill someone, that's a sin; it's kind of like that basis. If you're gay, then that's a sin.

Despite only three participants having directly experienced religiosity through their family, all six discussed the impact of the internalized oppression from the felt religious influence in their school environment. One common dialogue that emerged was around self-policing their identity and expression at school to avoid potential harassment and abuse. The experience of isolation resulting from the perceived lack of support and inclusion was shared across narratives. Dana expressed her disappointment with having to hide her gender identity:

I think it's really crappy I have to wait this long just because other people are unaccepting but it's not a safe space by any means. You wouldn't come here to be accepted and you wouldn't come here to find someone to be your best friend, that's also in the same community, that you could talk to about it. I feel

oppressed in the sense that I can't come out. Honestly it just makes you feel like you can't be yourself and like school isn't a safe environment.

The need to hide their gender identity and/or sexual orientation identity was shared by other participants as well. Elisabeth shared her reasons to keep her sexual orientation identity hidden: "I'm not in a rush to you know just tell everyone especially in such a conservative environment, it would be more trouble than I really need to worry about. I don't really need to bring it up." Hunter also expressed her experience that being diverse in gender identity or sexual orientation wasn't an option at her school:

I think this school in particular has certain set norms that are typically seen as okay. Minorities like that aren't really seen as an option and, when it does happen, because it doesn't happen very often, but when it does happen its kind of just ignored.

Hunter also expressed a feeling that it wasn't even safe for the school's Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), a support group for gender and sexual minority students and their allies, to advertise their club events in the school community. Hunter expressed "I think especially considering this school and this town, I think that it's best that they stay where they are right now because it would almost be more endangering to what they already have to further publicize themselves."

Likewise, in relation to her schools' GSA club, Rosie discussed her experience that even being seen associated with the club could be dangerous: "If you go into the GSA room than you're obviously like a lesbian right and everyone will think that about you, and you are going to be bullied."

The student narratives captured a shared experience of isolation and feeling unsafe to authentically express their gender and sexual orientation identity within their school spaces. Even in spaces deemed supportive for gender and sexual minority students, such as the school sanctioned GSA, hostility was experienced and association with this group was deemed risky.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Religiosity is often viewed as a protective factor, an important source of support for many individuals, and has been found to reduce the risk of negative emotional and physical health outcomes. However, there is a growing body of research supporting that this finding is not generalizable to gender and sexual minority individuals when this faith is of a non-affirming nature (Callaghan, 2009, 2015, 2016; Rostosky et al., 2008; 2010). The LDS church was used as an example in this study as a faith discourse that sanctions non-affirming beliefs pertaining to gender and sexual diversity. It was also an important context given the large population of LDS members in the communities that were sites for this study. It is important to note that not all members of the LDS faith fully ascribe to the non-affirming discourse of their religion and there is variability in the enactment of the faith's scriptures amongst parishioners. The influence of the LDS faith in these communities, as highlighted in this study, offers an example of the impact of Christian privilege that is felt by students attending non-denominational public schools situated in communities with a large population of non-affirming faith members. This study supports that religiosity, specifically non-affirming religious doctrine, contributed to the oppression experienced by participants in this study through their perception that Christian privilege had a role in the maintenance of heteronormative discourse in their schools and inhibited their teachers

from interrupting the routine homophobic and transphobic insults and microaggressions. Religiosity was also identified as having an influence on the attitudes and beliefs towards gender and sexually diverse students held by their peers and the larger community, and also contributed to an internalization of heterosexism, sexism, and cisgenderism that complicated the emotional and mental well-being of these students, leaving them feeling isolated, avoidant, or hesitant to express their gender or sexual identity at school.

It would be inappropriate for schools to aspire to alter the religious beliefs held by students, regardless of the discriminatory or prejudiced nature of these teachings. It is beyond the capacity of the school to control what students are taught at home or in their community. However, certain practices that occurred within the school were identified as contributors to this climate of prejudice and discrimination. For instance, when teachers called out derogatory language related to religion, yet avoided language that was abusive towards gender and sexually diverse students, this sent a strong message about whose rights and needs were more valued and protected in that space. At a systemic level, when schools engaged in religious teachings, through elementary bible studies, including certain aspects of religious education in Social Studies or History class, allowing religious groups to come in and give lectures about their faith and hand out church doctrine, or permit the heteronormative teachings of one particular faith and sanction it through assigning public school credits, a message was sent to students that the school supported the teachings and values of these faiths. Where this becomes problematic is when these teachings are in direct contradiction to creating safe and inclusive learning spaces for all students, regardless of gender and sexual orientation identity. To include them anyway, despite having a strong heteronormative and heterosexist bias, privileges non-affirming religious beliefs over the right for students to freely and safely express their gender or sexual orientation identity. Students are typically given an option to opt out of these religious classes, however, an important finding from this study was that those religious teachings still found their way into the school spaces through the other students who do engage in these teachings and become more justified in their stance, as their perspectives become sanctioned by their school. Arguably, it is the role of the school to protect the educational space from any messages or direct teaching that contradict the respect and safety of their students and compromise their critical developmental tasks of identity development and authentic enactment of self.

The findings from this study pertaining to religiosity draw important questions about the inclusion of non-affirming religious teachings towards gender and sexual diversity in the planned curriculum and the privileging of religious rights over students' rights to self-identify authentically in a safe and inclusive learning environment. When these rights conflict, the question that remains is: what should be given priority? Taylor et al. (2016) found in their study of educators' perceptions and attitudes relating to gender and sexual diversity that nearly 20% of their participants felt "teachers should be able to opt out of LGBTQ-inclusive education if it is against their religion" (Taylor et al., 2016, p, 129). These findings support the notion that, at least some, educators believe religious rights have priority over other rights (Taylor et al., 2016). This was highlighted across the narrative accounts as a substantial barrier to students feeling supported in their need to have the freedom to explore and express their identified sexuality and gender. The implication from this present study, and studies such as Taylor et al.'s (2016), is freedom of religion must not interfere with or be privileged above freedom of identity and expression if schools aspire to create safe and inclusive learning environments for students across the gender and sexuality spectrums where they can thrive and develop in a way that sustains healthy processes through adolescence and beyond.

The students who participated in this study illuminated a number of practical areas for educators and educational leaders to consider toward creating safer and more inclusive school spaces. The data generated from this study affirmed previous literature supporting the ongoing oppression of gender and sexual minority students, but also offered a unique opportunity to hear first-hand experiences from secondary students, attending non-denominational public schools, on the role they see religion playing on their educational experience around an important topic of diversity. These findings and the conversations contained in this research can be used as a starting place for future research continuing to question how gender and sexual minority youth can be better supported in high schools and, specifically, in high schools embedded in highly conservative communities and/or communities populated with many members of non-affirming faiths. This area of research is still in its infancy, with much more work needing to be done to continue to understand the conflicts of religion and identity and how this plays out in public schools across the globe. This study also reminds of the importance of including student voices in the dialogues that most affect them, such as the topic of this study. When provided an opportunity to be heard, students have very insightful and relevant things to say about the realities of life in schools and what they perceive as possibilities for anti-oppressive educational practices.

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