Are We There Yet? Educators as LGBTQ Advocates and Book Clubs as Professional Development

Alexis Marie Egan
Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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ARE WE THERE YET?
EDUCATORS AS LGBTQ ADVOCATES AND
BOOK CLUBS AS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Education

by
Alexis Marie Egan
B.A., Empire State College, 2011
M.A. State University of New York at Oswego, 2014
M.A.T., University of New Orleans, 2016
May 2021
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines Rainbow Advocates: An Educator’s Book Club, a book club study designed for educators wherein they read three works of LGBTQ young adult literature in Summer 2020. Purposes of the book club study include a consideration of how participating educators’ experiences with LGBTQ youth, literary materials, and training compare to past research. This dissertation includes an assessment of their readiness to handle LGBTQ issues in school sites and an evaluation of book clubs and reading LGBTQ young adult literature as a method of professional development for educators. In doing so, this dissertation draws on reader responses as per Rosenblatt’s Reader-Response Theory (1978) and employs ethnography as described by Creswell and Creswell (2018), respectively, as a theoretical framework and methodology. The goal of this research is to help educators and researchers replicate similar studies and to realize ways of improving education through the sharing of experiences and thoughts about YA literature with LGBTQ themes and characters.
CHAPTER 1. ISSUES AND POSSIBILITIES

Statement of the Issues

Each educator has their notion of what schooling is for with respect to curriculum and goals. Whichever view they take, research shows that school personnel agree safety (Ben-Arieh et al., 2009; Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Eccles & Roeser, 2011) and feelings of belonging or being included (Renzi et al., 2017) are basic requirements for students in order for them to learn and grow. Yet, an entire population of students often experience a distinct lack of both safety and inclusion in school settings and curriculum—those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, gender-fluid, non-binary, or pansexual (LGBTQ). These youth and those presumed to be LGBTQ routinely experience discrimination and a lack of acceptance in school sites, particularly at the elementary and secondary levels (Graybill & Proctor, 2016; Kosciw et al., 2014).

Specific trials faced by this population include numerous forms of bullying, among them name-calling, teasing in person and online (Frankfurt, 2000; Gordon, 1994), harassment and assault, delayed social development (MacGillivray, 2000), invisibility, and few positive LGBTQ role models (Knaier, 2017; Kosciw & Cullen, 2001). The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reported in 2013 that 55% of LGBTQ students surveyed related feeling unsafe at school, 36% of whom had been physically harassed by classmates (Kosciw et al., 2014, p. xvi). Faculty can also contribute to their discrimination and to hostile, unsafe school environments for LGBTQ students through a lack of support and intervention. Researchers have found that, in some instances, educators are themselves participating in bigotry against LGBTQ students. Eighty-one percent of students surveyed by GLSEN in 2013 indicated that teachers and
administrators typically don’t intervene or respond when anti-LGBTQ bullying occurs (Knaier, 2017, p. 14). Reynolds (2017) likewise found that 50% of students interviewed reported hearing heterosexist, homophobic, and gender-phobic remarks from faculty on a regular basis (p. 387).

Research looking into why such occurrences persist unchecked attribute them to a lack of LGBTQ literature in school sites and the pervasive fear or lack of knowledge held by educators who would support LGBTQ students in affirmative ways (Alexander & Miselis, 2007; Clark & Blackburn, 2009; Flores, 2012; Hughes-Hassell et al., 2013; Rothbauer and McKechnie, 1999). Only 44% of an approximate 8,500 students surveyed by GLSEN in 2011 reported being able to find information LGBTQ literature (fiction and nonfiction) in their school libraries or classrooms (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2013, p. 3). Correspondingly, research shows that neither teacher education programs nor school-led professional development adequately train educators to utilize LGBTQ literature or approach LGBTQ issues overall (Knaier, 2017; Murray, 2015). Knaier (2017) specifically found that approximately two-thirds of educators surveyed report never receiving training on how to approach LGBTQ literature or work with LGBTQ students in their teacher education programs. This lack of training has in turn been linked to educators’ pervasive struggles with anti-LGBTQ phobias and their mishandling of pushback from administrators and students’ parents/caregivers (Eckes & McCarthy, 2008; Gray et al., 2016; Wright & Smith, 2015).

Action must be taken to address this multi-faceted problem for the sake of LGBTQ youth and their straight, cisgender peers. Bishop (1990) notes that students benefit greatly from seeing themselves and those different from them reflected affirmatively in literature as it helps build on their self-esteem and their capacity to empathize with diverse perspectives (Bishop, 1990). Similarly, research shows that LGBTQ literature used affirmatively can serve all parties as a
form of much-needed bibliotherapy as it helps engender transformational experiences (Helmer, 2016) and provoke critical dialogue (Gallagher, 2004; Town, 2017). To help educators realize these possibilities in their school sites, specific training that makes use of literature with LGBTQ themes and characters must become a priority within teacher education programs and school-led professional development. Research simultaneously needs to offer educators considerably more tools and methods upon which to draw. This research should focus on equipping educators to use LGBTQ literature meaningfully with their particular students, with attention given to regional context and values, and on ways to navigate pushback and other hostilities effectively.

I hereby proposed a summer book club study in which high school educators in the vicinity of East Baton Rouge responded to and engaged LGBTQ young adult literature (YAL). The proposed study examined the needs of participants, if any, in relation to LGBTQ affirmation. Per my background in secondary education, the study was designed for educators who work with high school-aged youth to engage literature written for that age group in an informal book club. Southeastern and Central Louisiana and the region’s relationship to LGBTQ affirmation was considered contextually in the study with emphasis on religious and social values prominent in the area. These regional values were not examined to the point where educators in different regions can’t make use of the tools, methods, or data provided herein.

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

Key in the purpose of this book club study was assessing participants’ readiness to integrate LGBTQ materials directly into curriculum, and discerning what beliefs and experiences influenced their transactions with texts and each other. I aimed to consider participating educators’ knowledge, skill, and comfort with respect to their approach of LGBTQ YAL,
pushback, and issues overall. In turn, the study analyzed their needs in comparison to recommendations outlined in similar studies; in doing so it advances scholarship on the intersection of LGBTQ issues and educators’ professional development.

The study was distinct from similar, past research given its use of Rosenblatt’s Reader-Response Theory (1978) as a theoretical framework. Through Reader-Response Theory, I analyzed the types of transactions that occurred between participants of the book club and the three selected texts. Attention in this analysis was given to how participants in the study related to characters and themes in the chosen readings, and what those connections signaled about their knowledge, skill, and comfort with broader LGBTQ issues. Rosenblatt’s concept was expanded upon to look at what transactions took place between participants of the book club study in order to discern any similarities or differences in opinions about specific content in the readings or LGBTQ issues more broadly. The concept of readiness and Reader-Response Theory in connection with educators’ approach of LGBTQ issues remains underexplored through a book club format and constitutes a notable gap in research.

Possibilities linked to the use of YAL for professional development purposes also warranted conducting the study. Substantial research shows that reading YAL leads to a deconstruction of stereotypes (Blazar, 2009; Comment, 2009; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003), engagement of diverse ideologies and representations (Batchelor et al., 2018), and an expansion of participants’ knowledge of the world around them (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). It was my hope that participants built on their understanding of diverse sexualities and their ability to challenge LGBTQ-specific bullying and abuse (Flores, 2012). The book club study explored how, through informal discussions of parallel issues in the readings, participants met or didn’t meet this goal. For the participants unfamiliar with LGBTQ experiences, concepts, and
terminology, engaging YA titles with LGBTQ themes and characters, I sought to have the study build on their knowledge-base and ability to identify how such content relates to their students’ lives, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Together, these facets of the study were designed to affect a narrower discussion of book clubs as professional development and what methods of instruction work best for educators and students in secondary settings. Goals of the study included participants’ growth as practitioners, thinkers, and advocates for those who identify as LGBTQ and straight, cisgender students come to understand the perspectives and experiences of the former. In tandem, their participation in the study was intended to elicit educators’ inward reflection as much as their external analysis of what occurs in the context of a classroom, library, or other educational space. Lastly, the study aimed to examine benefits of the study with respect to the creation of a local community of allies who can speak to the reasons why such professional development is a necessity for educators.

**Research Questions**

Three research questions guided me in my various roles throughout the book club study and in the ethnographic analysis that followed. In constructing these questions, my focus was on the experiences, attitudes, and knowledge of participating educators. My goal in designing these questions was to have them as a guideline by which to contemplate interactions between members, transactions between members and readings, and the book club model as a tool for professional development. The respective research questions are answered in conjunction with a discussion of the themes that emerge from the study’s data in Chapter 5. Research questions include (1) What LGBTQ topics are participants not ready to teach and why?; (2) How do
participants integrate their personal experiences, backgrounds, and beliefs into the discussions?;

(3) In what ways is an educators’ book club an effective means of professional development?

Definition of Terms

There were several terms of note integral to conducting the book club and analyzing findings. Each of these terms was borrowed or adapted from articles or books discovered in the literature review. Terms germane to this study are provided in alphabetical order.

Facilitator

I decided while planning the book club study to have someone knowledgeable of my reasons for conducting the study serve as the primary facilitator during book club meetings and with respect to recruitment of participants. This decision allowed me to concentrate more on taking field notes per my role as a participant observer and join in conversations on a limited basis. The term was drawn from research considering educators’ learning communities (Ahn, 2010; Alles et al., 2019; Hogle & Bramble, 2020; Niesz, 2010; Riley, 2015) and the creation of safe spaces (Coley & Das, 2020. Young & McKibban, 2014). I drew in particular on the ideas of Riley (2015) and Ahn (2010) and their similar notion of the facilitator as an individual who creates structural opportunities, i.e. guiding questions that are thematic in nature, for members of a group to talk, share, and respond to (Ahn, 2010, p. 36; Riley, 2020, p. 419). In light of these recommendations, I called on the facilitator to help provide a welcoming atmosphere, open each discussion by posing an open-ended question or prompt, and moderating discussions as needed when conversation lagged. Their role hence entailed adopting a teacher-like role and making the environment both a safe space and a supportive one (Coley & Das, 2020) and establishing a
community-like feel through an encouragement of “interpersonal connections” (Young & McKibban, 2014, p. 378).

**LGBTQ**

Of equal importance is a clear description of what/who the acronym LGBTQ refers to for participants and readers alike. For the purposes of this study, LGBTQ will refer to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, gender-fluid, non-binary, or pansexual. Critical is participants’ and readers’ knowledge that gender identity and sexual orientation are distinct from one another. Similarly, the acronym LGBTQ is one of several variations that refer to those who don’t identify as straight or as cisgender, i.e. identifying with or as the gender they’re assigned at birth. LGBTQ should be considered as synonymous with other variations of the term, i.e. GLBTQ, LGBTQIA, LGBTQ+, etc., so that no studies or articles are missed by researchers. This term will introduce both parties to the spectrum of sexualities/sexual orientations and gender identities which serve as the focus of the book club’s readings and those whom participants may serve as advocates for.

**Members/Participants**

In this study, I used these terms interchangeably to refer to the secondary educators taking part in the book club study. The terms arose naturally from past experience I’ve had participating in book clubs myself. In using these terms, I sought to emphasize the communal nature of book clubs and that these educators’ positionalities and responses in relation to analysis of the study were the focus of the study.

**Participant Observer**

I chose to serve as a participant observer alongside my role as the researcher in the book club study. This term and the duties/actions it involved were influenced by research articles I
encountered during the literature review (Kennedy-Lewis, 2012; Labaree, 2002; Murray et al., 2020), each of which emphasizes the duality of the role, being both a participant and an observer. In keeping with comments made by other researchers, this role involved shifting from observer to participant or vice versa on a consistent basis during book club meetings. Initially, I thought to be as much of a participant as the other members of the book club study; as the study progressed, however, I became more of a distant observer given to “monitoring and documenting” (Murray et al., 2020, p. 107) discussions in order to be able catch mannerisms, i.e. body language, and thoughts voiced by participants as they occurred. This reflects what Kennedy-Lewis remarked on in her article, noting that past experience as an educator subconsciously drew her toward adopting a role closely related to that of a teacher in her study. I likewise found myself engaging in teacher-like behaviors during the course of book club discussions, such as subtly directing members back onto topic when they veered away from pertinent issues to idle chatter in the middle of a discussion. Balancing my observations with the odd comment about the readings or LGBTQ issues directly necessitated being highly observant and giving more leeway/control of the discussion’s flow to the participants themselves and that of the facilitator the few times that conversation faltered.

Readiness

Of particular importance to the book club study is the term readiness; it applies to participating secondary educators and their capacity to understand, integrate, and empathize with LGBTQ-themed YAL. Readiness was a term I encountered in multiple articles focused on the capacities of educators, social workers, and other professionals known for work with youth. Various articles to readiness or synonyms, i.e. competency, as encompassing the abilities of professionals working with youth (Craig et al., 2016), recognition of what beliefs and
assumptions guide educators’ actions (Murry et al., 2020, p. 109), and the complexities of the term and its reliance on such things as relationship-building, diversity, and collaboration between professionals (Zhou, 2018).

For the purposes of this study, I drew heavily on Craig et al. (2016) and their notion of competency as a mastery of knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of social workers in their practice (p. 116). In turn, I adapted their focus on mental health to an educational context but retained their emphasis on readiness as the ability of professionals to take initiative and demonstrate competency in their practice with LGBTQ youth as a vulnerable population. I furthermore exchanged their notion of values or attitudes for the term comfort as it better signifies educators’ ease or unease working with LGBTQ youth, materials, and issues in climates that may be hostile and/or unwelcoming. I summarily define readiness as a demonstration of their knowledge, skill, and comfort in the following ways.

- Knowledge of LGBTQ youth and families’ experiences at their school site
- Knowledge of LGBTQ YAL and how such texts can be of use to all students
- Skill integrating LGBTQ materials into curriculum to disrupt normative thinking
- Skill handling pushback and censorship of LGBTQ materials
- Skill at establishing and maintaining a safe space for all students
- Comfort with open discussions of LGBTQ themes and materials
- Comfort working with LGBTQ youth and advocating for their rights

These qualities determined analysis of participants’ comments and observation of their body language through ethnography as endorsed by Creswell and Creswell (2018). The respective qualities were chosen following a thorough literature review on documented outcomes of reading YAL with LGBTQ themes. They were adapted from similar outcomes identified in pedagogy-focused literature with an overall goal to determine participants’ readiness. Each ability was examined critically in an effort to determine how much readiness participants display over the course of the book club—both individually and collectively.
Conclusion

There is a lot at stake for both LGBTQ youth and their straight, cisgender peers with respect to education and for educators as the individuals who are tasked with making sure that these youth are given equity in their education. This chapter was designed as an entry point into this issue for readers and as primer outlining the need for such a study. Making strides toward a full equity in education for LGBTQ youth will call upon researchers and educators to not only invest their time as readers herein but find ways to apply it to their own interactions with LGBTQ youth in educational sites. Chapter 2 will expand on this need through an exploration of literature that intersects research on curriculum and instruction with LGBTQ materials. Chapter 2 accomplishes this through a review of several pertinent threads that contribute to our knowledge of the state of education for LGBTQ youth and educators’ training, and where it should go in the future.
CHAPTER 2. A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Several topics were researched in preparation for the book club study. These threads included YAL with LGBTQ themes and characters, LGBTQ materials in elementary and secondary schools, and educator training with respect to LGBTQ topics. I selected these threads for preliminary research based on my experiences as both a student and an educator. I’ve experienced firsthand the lack of attention and affirmation given to LGBTQ youth and issues facing such youth from both perspectives.

Research on the topics involved approximately three months spent exploring various databases made available by LSU. This literature review involved searches for articles and books that looked at LGBTQ YAL and issues for LGBTQ youth in educational sites. Among the databases I made frequent use of were, i.e. ERIC, MLA International Bibliography, JSTOR, Children’s Literature Comprehensive Database, Gale Literature Resource Center, and H.W. Wilson. These databases were chosen given their emphasis on literature and/or education, each leading to different results based on the terms and phrases that I used in searches.

An array of terms were used in my exploration of these databases and in the literature review as a whole. Key terms included variations of the acronym LGBTQ, i.e. LGBT, LGBTQIA, LGBTQ+, GLBT, and GLBTQ. In addition to various acronyms that connote members of the LGBTQ spectrum were terms written out in full which represent such individuals, i.e. gay, lesbian, and transgender. Modifying the acronym LGBTQ and using specific terms related to members on the LGBTQ spectrum helped uncover an ample number of articles and books that spanned roughly from 1950 to the present. Earlier texts were less
politically correct or inclusive, often using dated terminology to indicate members of the LGBTQ community, i.e. homosexual, homosexuality, transvestite, and transexual.

The best results were found by using more contemporary, inclusive terms when intersected with education-related terms, i.e. curriculum, inclusion, pedagogy, and educators. A narrowing of publication dates further helped find key texts that addressed many of the issues I had personally encountered as a student and educator, and which were the driving force behind the early stages of this study. In narrowing publication dates for research findings, I made the decision to focus on materials from the past two decades (c. 2000-2020) to coincide with the surge of high-quality LGBTQ YAL published in this period. Exceptions were made for earlier, groundbreaking research referenced in contemporary texts as key in the scope of how LGBTQ YAL and its place in school sites had evolved.

A close reading of key groundbreaking texts and an estimated eighty-five articles and sections from approximately fifteen books helped me to hone my research design and the particulars of the book club study in that period. The literature review likewise helped further my understanding of the issues at play in the current state of education for LGBTQ youth, their straight, cisgender peers, and the educators who are responsible for their tutoring and exploration of themselves and the world around them. In this close reading, I began to discern several notable trends or recurring themes that emerged and which would play a critical role in the book club study that followed.

**Literature Review Themes**

Contemporary research (c. 2000-Present) on YAL with LGBTQ themes revealed several recurring subtopics and corresponding outcomes. The most predominant subtopic I found
explores gaps with respect to characters and issues in the body of LGBTQ-themed YAL, often narrowed to a particular group or theme such as LGBTQ of color or transgender characters. Research on YAL with such themes from an educational context revealed a similar number of trends and subtopics—most of which focus on teachers’ lack of readiness to fully integrate materials dealing with LGBTQ themes into curriculum. A majority of the latter group critiques teacher education programs and a lack of professional development as the leading cause of this inability to integrate LGBTQ materials, YAL included, into curriculum.

Teacher education programs are designed to take a leading role in training teachers and ensuring their readiness on multiple fronts (Jennings & Sherwin, 2008; Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006; Nuttall, 2016) yet rarely afford teachers training on LGBTQ themes. Their training lacks attention on methods or frameworks that best accompany the teaching of LGBTQ content (Knaier, 2017), ways of facilitating in-depth dialogue on such issues (Gray et al., 2016), and how to enforce antiharassment policies against LGBTQ (Bott, 2000; Murray, 2015; Tollafield, 2015). Consequently, educators confess that they struggle regularly with homophobia and other forms of oppression prevalent in school climates (Eckes & McCarthy, 2008; Wright & Smith, 2015) and feel ill-prepared to address any LGBTQ issues or materials in a classroom (Gray et al., 2016; Murray, 2015). This points to a critical need for training that is intersected with both research (Szalcha, 2004) and practice for teachers (Magnus & Lundin, 2016).

Consistent calls for professional development simultaneously characterized this subtopic, as do an array of ideas that preservice and acting teachers can utilize to prepare themselves to integrate LGBTQ content directly into their curriculum. Examples of this include employing such frameworks as multicultural education and queer theory/praxis, and taking part in teacher book clubs (Batchelor et al., 2018; Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Blazar, 2009; Botelho &
Rudman, 2009; Comment, 2009; Dinkins & Englert, 2015; Flores, 2012; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003; Smolkin & Young, 2011). Texts in this category typically positioned the inclusion of LGBTQ-themed YAL in concert with such professional development as an effective way of disrupting oppressive thinking, i.e. homophobia, transphobia, and hetero- and cis-normativity, and improving school climates (Blackburn, 2011; Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Giffney, 2009; Gorski et al., 2013; Magnus & Lundin, 2016; Mayo, 2014; Szalcha, 2004; Warner, 1993). Educators can benefit greatly from a basic awareness of these phobias and forms of normative thinking, which in turn may help lend to their awareness of how to address and integrating topics within YAL with LGBTQ themes into curriculum.

**Historical Perspective of LGBTQ Young Adult Literature**

Characters and themes in LGBTQ-themed YAL progressed at a very gradual pace from 1969 through the 1990s. Jan Goodman (1983), Alan Cuseo (1992), and Christine Jenkins (1998) each noted persistent issues with the content of most early LGBTQ-themed YAL, i.e. John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969) and Rosa Guy’s *Ruby* (1976), and its implications for adolescent readers in a society that was already hostile and, in some cases, explicitly violent towards LGBTQ individuals. Reviews performed by the respective scholars found bleak results despite minimal improvement in the visibility and treatment of LGBTQ characters in the 1990s. Their shared/respective findings included the following.

- Chiefly gay and lesbian characters were featured, other LGBTQ figures being largely absent
- White gay male characters continually outnumbered lesbians and characters of color
- Same-sex attraction was regularly portrayed as a passing phase
- There was a high prevalence of tragic events for lesbian and gay characters
- Little to no depictions of queer communities or support systems for gay and lesbian teens were present
• YAL shifted away from lesbian and gay protagonists in favor of straight narrators dealing with lesbian and gay secondary characters, often a relative, friend, or teacher.

This less-than-optimistic beginning for LGBTQ-themed YAL prompted them and numerous other early scholars to call for significant improvement in the content and quality of YA titles (Cuseo, 1992; Goodman, 1983; Jenkins, 1998; St. Clair, 1995; Wilson, 1984). Jenkins, reviewing the most recent works, noted that gay and lesbian characters continued to be seen as “Other” up through 1997 (1998, p. 320). This othering prevented LGBTQ adolescent readers from finding much use or relevance in the assorted texts (Cuseo, 1992). Similarly, scholars noted that the excess of tragic endings for LGBTQ characters, a majority of whom were gay males and lesbian females, might lead teens to believe that such tragedies are a natural punishment for homosexuality (Cuseo, 1992; Goodman, 1983; Jenkins, 1998). Goodman concluded that “the best literature is yet to be written” (p. 15).

It was not until the mid-2000s and 2010s that LGBTQ-themed YAL began to expand in scope; in that time, it underwent several key improvements (Bittner et al., 2016; Cart, 2016; Crisp, 2009; Jenkins & Cart, 2018; Wickens, 2011). These improvements included increases in YAL with LGBTQ protagonists, empathetic portrayals of LGBTQ, and a greater diversity in terms of LGBTQ characters. This decade furthermore saw the emergence of the first genderqueer, non-binary, and gender-fluid protagonists in YAL. With respect to tone and content, LGBTQ YAL became more character-driven with fewer problem-plots, as well as featuring more nuanced treatments of situations, more complex narratives, and stories containing humorous tones instead of traumatic ones. Lastly, titles moved from strictly being contemporary realism to include such genres as magical realism, historical fiction, speculative fiction, short stories, graphic novels, comics, and poetry.
These improvements pose considerable benefits for all adolescent readers and doubly so for those on the LGBTQ spectrum. Most important is how they allow LGBTQ youth the opportunity to see themselves (Bishop, 1990) in enjoyable titles of increased literary quality marketed to their age group. Straight, cisgender youth are simultaneously given the opportunity to develop empathy for the experiences of LGBTQ youth through such literature (Bishop, 1990). Third is how the changes in narrative style and content better respect the maturity of adolescent readers and more fully stimulate their emotional and intellectual benefit. Finally, the sheer growth of YA titles published from 2000 to 2019 reflects a higher rate of social acceptance and receptiveness toward LGBTQ identities, in turn prompting more writers to create and celebrate diversity in their own writings (Cart, 2016; Jenkins & Cart, 2018).

Despite these improvements, scholars note lingering issues in the body of LGBTQ-themed YAL published to date and its presence in educational spaces. Issues within YAL still include an underrepresentation of characters who identify as bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual, genderqueer, gender-fluid non-binary, pansexual, and LGBTQ characters of color (Bittner et al., 2016; Cart, 2016; Jenkins & Cart, 2018). Persistent stereotypes in these works also remain critiqued by researchers, i.e. gayness or bisexuality as passing phases or experimentation, bisexuals as promiscuous or unfaithful (Barker et al., 2012; Coletta, 2018; Kneen, 2015; McLean, 2001; Roberts et al., 2015). Authentic portrayals based on authors’ personal experiences remain largely absent, as is evident in the limited number of transgender authors writing YA titles (Putzi, 2017; Rockefeller, 2007; Sokoll, 2013). The still-overwhelming abundance of problem plots being published is a fourth concern, particularly when titles focus on intersex and asexual characters (Epstein, 2015). Such issues may prevent adolescent readers from
finding positive affirmation in a narrative and lend to the same kinds of issues that early LGBTQ-themed YAL might have inspired (Jenkins & Cart, 2018).

The threat of censorship plays an equal role in access to high-quality, affirmative materials. LGBTQ-themed YAL remains one of the most highly-contested areas of literature to date, particularly in classrooms and school libraries (Cart, 2016; Jenkins, 2000). Alongside such censorship is an inability of youth to locate adequate resources, fictional or nonfictional, and a reluctance to ask for such materials (Alexander & Miselis, 2007; Hughes-Hassell et al., 2013), making it vital that such materials be publicized in a variety of school spaces. Failing to do so leads adolescent readers, whether LGBTQ or not, to perceive LGBTQ experiences and lives as neither valued nor welcomed (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2013). In contrast, having easy access to a variety of LGBTQ-themed YA titles and informational resources helps discourage bullying (Whelan, 2006), prevents feelings of alienation for LGBTQ youth (Rauch, 2010), and increases the likelihood that members of a school community will become allies and advocates for LGBTQ individuals (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2013).

Knowledge of the benefits for adolescent readers is a large first step for educators. Equally useful is their knowledge of what to look for and what to avoid when selecting LGBTQ-themed texts for curriculum and specific work/learning spaces. Due to the ongoing lack of professional development on LGBTQ-affirmative curriculum and approach of LGBTQ issues, many remain uncertain of how to use such texts, let alone think critically about their own perspectives, experiences, and skills in relation to them. Key in combatting this uncertainty and lack of skill is engaging in educator book clubs devoted to reading LGBTQ-themed YAL.
Educators’ Book Clubs

Book clubs are recognized as powerful models for educators’ professional development (Burbank et al., 2010; Dail et al., 2009; Gardiner et al., 2013). They eclipse most other models of professional development by situating participants as active arbitrators in the creation of their own knowledge and result in knowledge co-created between members (Burbank et al., 2010; Mayer White, 2016). Educators who’ve participated in book clubs report feeling enabled to discuss larger issues (Burbank et al., 2010) and experiencing higher satisfaction (Smith & Galbraith, 2011) than in other professional development models. Documented outcomes include improved language and communication skills (Gritter; 2011; Hall, 2009), new ways of constructing meaning (Twomey, 2007), deeper understandings of and expertise with topics, genres, and themes explored in group discussions (Álvarez-Álvarez, 2016; Beach & Yussen, 2011; Oszakiewski & Spelman, 2011), and being more democratic and deliberative in their practice (Burbank et al., 2010). Evidence also indicates that book clubs increase participants’ awareness, empathy, and understandings of different backgrounds and perspectives (Flood et al., 1994; Flood & Lapp, 1994), making them particularly useful for building educators’ capacity to engage LGBTQ materials and youth.

As of the writing of this dissertation, little research speaks explicitly of book clubs’ potential in respect to approaching and integrating LGBTQ-themed YAL into curriculum directly. The few who do explore this topic conclude that reading YAL with these themes in teacher-led book clubs may generate several notable outcomes. Among the outcomes are a capacity for honest discussions about what LGBTQ and questioning youth face, critical questionings of how anti-LGBTQ language and normative thinking is employed in classrooms (Mayer White, 2016; Parker & Bach, 2009). Additional outcomes include disrupting LGBTQ
stereotypes, bullying on the basis of LGBTQ status and gender performance, and establishing a capacity for empathy toward/with those who have difference identities and experiences (Mayer-White, 2016; Parker & Bach, 2009; Russell, 2008).

These outcomes pose immense usefulness for educators and their students in relation to creating and sustaining LGBTQ-affirmative school sites, outshining benefits linked to other models of professional development, i.e. online learning forums and one-time seminars. Educators can furthermore benefit from piloting LGBTQ-themed book clubs that double as educator communities in which members share ideas related to instructional methods, teaching philosophies, and trends in research alongside their response to and impressions of literary texts (Pareja Roblin et al., 2014; Stoll et al., 2006; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Grossman et al., 2001; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Levine, 2010; Wenger, 1998). Such dialogue and collaboration can greatly influence classroom practice at multiple levels of education and help educators achieve best practice (Broekkamp & Van Hout-Wolters, 2007; Burkhardt & Schoenfeld, 2003; McIntyre, 2005) when working with LGBTQ materials, themes, and youth.

Educators who aim to pilot a LGBTQ-themed book club with such outcomes in mind are not without guides to draw upon despite limited research that intersects book clubs and LGBTQ-themed YAL (Dunne & Goode, 2007). Resources available outline numerous steps and guidelines upon which educators can draw when designing and facilitating teacher book clubs. Research encourages that initial book club meetings establish a sense of trust amongst members (Dunne & Goode, 2007) and focus on elevating reading comprehension through collaboration (Gallagher, 2004). Once up-and-running, book club discussions should be kept informal and free-flowing, as well as positioned around personal response (Flood & Lapp, 1994). Book club facilitators, if any are present, are moreover encouraged to include open-ended, inquiry-based
questions that allow for members’ personal reflection and instructional reform (Fichtman Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020).

A notable exception on LGBTQ-themed YAL and its intersection with an educator book club can be found in an article by Parker and Bach (2009). They outline several distinct guidelines for educators on how to create and sustain a book club on the themes of transgenderism and gender variance in YAL. Select steps they encourage include identifying interested educators via a questionnaire, selecting a group facilitator and/or moderator, providing members with a packet of resources prior to the first meeting, i.e. LGBTQ terminology and frequently-asked questions, and devising text selection strategies (p. 97-98). Their procedure-like description of how to pilot an educator book club on YAL with LGBTQ themes can be of significant use to educators aiming to become knowledgeable allies for their LGBTQ students, if not LGBTQ individuals overall.

Additional resources that can accomplish this aim include the frequent collaborations of Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins, co-writers of such bibliographic texts as The Heart has its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969–2004 (2006) and Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ Content Since 1969 (2018). Among the helpful tips and guidelines that they offer to educators and readers are seeking out fleshed-out characters and realistic settings (2006) when selecting YA texts. Parker and Bach (2009) and other scholars offer similar advice, arguing that text selection processes include avoiding LGBTQ stereotypes, recognizing that context matters (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015), and using life-based literary narratives (Bach et al., 2011; Parker & Bach, 2009; Phillion & He, 2004). Taking such issues into account is shown to help affect critical inquiry (Parker &
Bach, 2009) and lend to readers’ enjoyment of texts alongside the affirmation of LGBTQ identities and experiences such readings can inspire.

Conclusion

Reading research that looks at what LGBTQ youth and educators experience in educational sites, the progression of LGBTQ YAL, and the efficacy of book clubs as professional development was the motivation that ultimately led to the study that I propose in Chapter 3. In the subsequent chapter, I enter into detail about the design of the study and what it could mean for educators who wish to be affirmative of LGBTQ identities and materials, if they aren’t already, and how this could help to improve upon the experiences of LGBTQ youth and their straight, cisgender peers in sites hostile toward the former. A range of topics are covered in Chapter 3, among them the timeline for the book club study, its theoretical framework and methodology, as well as the research design, research questions guiding me as the researcher, and more. It is my hope that researchers at the postsecondary level will be able to draw upon it in their own work and that educators at the secondary level will likewise find something of use in it.
CHAPTER 3. DESIGN AND PROCEDURES

Introduction

Planning for the book club study took place from December 2019 to April 2020. Key in its design was that it be an opportunity for participating educators to interact in a safe space with one another. By safe space, I refer to a judgment-free zone in which participants could safely and confidently share their feelings and ideas about their respective school sites, teacher education programs, and experiences overall with respect to LGBTQ topics (Coley & Das, 2020; Peters, 2003). The book club study was designed to take into account how participating educators’ comments and experiences compared to what was indicated in the research reviewed in Chapter 2. This chapter outlines the setting, theoretical framework, methodology, research design, materials, and tools of the study.

Settings

Preparation and data collection for the book club study took place through two settings, email communication and Zoom. Planning focused on recruiting participants for the book club study and determining the format of the meetings, including their length and what activities we hoped to have participants engage in during meetings, i.e. an exit ticket, housekeeping, and icebreaker discussions. Originally, the book club’s interactions were intended to take place in person at either in LSU’s Main Library or at a similarly quiet location in East Baton Rouge Parish where privacy was an option. However, the threat of the Coronavirus Pandemic prompted me to make the book club study a virtual one in order to ensure participants’ health was not at risk. This necessitated reconfiguring several elements of the book club study’s design, namely using Zoom as the setting for book club discussions and other real-time interactions with
members—the sole exception was my handing out books to the facilitator and other members of the study with the aid of a mask and gloves.

**Theoretical Framework**

A range of theoretical frameworks were considered during the design of the book club study. Of these frameworks, Rosenblatt’s (1978) Reader-Response Theory was identified as the most useful given the study’s focus on reading YAL with LGBTQ themes. Using this theoretical framework struck me as the most applicable, or befitting, given that educators would be engaging with YA readings written for the age group that they respectively taught in their professional lives. My intent was to have them engage these readings and see what transactions occurred from both a professional and personal standpoint.

Looking at what transactions occurred between participants as readers and the text in conjunction with Rosenblatt’s theories (1978) ultimately led to further exploration of their experiences and personal proximities in relation to chosen readings. I sought to examine to what unfolded between them and characters in the respective readings (Álvarez-Álvarez, 2016; Rosenblatt, 1978) and thereafter engage in a critical questioning of any connections that the participating educators brought to readings occur and how those connections originated (Anderson, 1991). Reader-Response Theory subsequently proved especially valuable in examining participants’ individual responses to selected readings. Key was how it allowed me to consider the proximity that participants had to an LGBTQ character’s perspectives and experiences and the knowledge, skill, and comfort that they displayed when discussing these texts and broader issues which that content reflected. Reader-Response Theory posed equal use with regard to an interrogation of assumptive and/or normative thinking; it was significant in
how it highlighted participants’ assumptions about pronouns, gender identity, and stereotypes about LGBTQ individuals, several of which they were unaware of helping to maintain or holding themselves prior to the start of the book club.

The use of Reader-Response Theory and what it revealed about the participants’ readiness and the efficacy of book clubs as professional development went hand-in-hand. Looking at how transactions occurred between participants in discussion of these issues and of the readings was highly important for this book club study and, I believe, will prove useful in future research on the intersection of LGBTQ-themed YAL and professional development for educators.

**Methodology**

Several methodologies, among them case study (Alexander, 2019; Hawley, 2010; Moore, 2016; Zhou, 2018) and narrative inquiry (Karalis Noel, 2020; Tanvir Syed, 2008; Tillapaugh & Catalano, 2019), were explored prior to ethnography being selected as the best methodology for the book club study given its emphasis on the study of a particular group experiencing a shared phenomenon. Using ethnography lent toward my capacity to compare how participating educators experienced the phenomenon of LGBTQ exclusion and lack of affirmation, as well as received/responded to content in the three LGBTQ YA texts we chose to read. Likewise, ethnography seemed the best means by which “shared patterns of behavior, language, and actions of an intact cultural group” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13) could be observed. The two threads ultimately came together and revealed that ethnography is a highly effective means of analysis when working with a group of educators who live and work within close proximity to one another.
After deciding on ethnography as the best possible methodology in Spring 2020, I began to engage in a deeper review of other ethnographies to gain inspiration regarding what tools and methods would best complement the focus on the book club study and my purpose in conducting it. In conducting this research, I found articles and reports of note that likewise served as a model for the book club study design and methods of analysis befitting the study. Among these influences were texts that looked at the efficacy of book clubs (Álvarez-Álvarez, 2016; George, 2001; Parker & Bach, 2009) and ethnographies that provided insight with respect to effective tools, procedures, and the discussion of data results (Boyle-Baise & Kilbane, 1999; Eriksson, 2017; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001).

George (2001) was especially key in the design of the book club study’s data sources and their analysis. The questionnaires, interviews, and observations/field notes I utilized in the book club study borrowed heavily from their report in terms of both design and the method by which data from the respective sources was analyzed. Per their recommendation, I used a comparative triangulation of responses from the questionnaires and to interview questions with what I observed of participants. My field notes were then analyzed in conjunction with data from interviews and questionnaires to discern common themes. In doing so, I used a comparative tabling (George, 2001, p. 5-6) of coded data (Saldaña, 2016) that allowed me to determine what themes emerged from the data sources and how they compared to what was said in past research on this topic (George, 2001; Spradley, 1980). Statements from the respective data sources that were of particular note were thereafter used to capture what Creswell (1998) referred to as “the essence of the faculty book club experience” (p. 150) and help determine what participants’ collective readiness signaled about their ability to approach LGBTQ issues, working with LGBTQ youth, and reception to the chosen LGBTQ YA texts we read. Using these procedures
and the triangulation of the data collected helped reveal several things in respect to the research questions I designed (George, 2001), as did the theoretical framework that I used to look at participants’ individual interactions with chosen readings during the book club study.

**Research Design**

Using ethnography as described by George (2001) and select other researchers (Boyle-Baise & Kilbane, 1999; Creswell, 1998; Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Eriksson, 2017; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001) alongside Rosenblatt’s (1978) Reader-Response Theory was integral to the design of the study. Reader-Response Theory was key in helping me make sense of what participants’ individual transactions with the readings indicated about their readiness (knowledge, comfort, and skill). Ethnography, in contrast, helped me look comparatively at their individual and collective experiences with what earlier research said of educators dealing with the phenomenon of LGBTQ exclusion and bigotry (bullying, harassment, etc.) in school sites.

**Factoring in Coronavirus**

Conducing a virtual book club and meeting these two goals in the midst of the Coronavirus Pandemic required that additional measures be taken with both the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at LSU and for participants. Up to that point in time, relatively few book club studies with such a narrow scope had been conducted virtually (Angelone, 2019; Hine, 2000; Wheeler, 2017) and fewer still, if any, conducted in the midst of a global crisis that had an unprecedented impact on so many populations. It became necessary to factor in not only participating educators’ new normal as they attempted to handle teaching virtual or hybrid courses but to consider their health and safety. Reconfiguring the study to be a virtual one
required several special measures to be taken, i.e. delivering books with the aid of masks and gloves while maintaining a reasonable distance. In terms of using a virtual platform for book club discussions, it was necessary to employ a password for Zoom meetings and guarantee participants at several points that all video recordings would be viewed only by me and deleted from all electronic devices once no longer needed. These concerns were addressed at numerous points throughout the planning stages or design of the study, as well as communicated to participants during virtual interactions that took place between two of us, i.e. book club meetings and one-on-one interviews.

**Book Club Model**

Two distinct book club models were considered at length. The first proposed model theorized recruiting openly-LGBTQ educators in East Baton Rouge Parish or surrounding regions and only a small number of straight educators who identified as cisgender. This model was considered as a way to increase the likelihood that several participating educators would themselves have experienced bigotry or exclusion on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity as youth. The second model involved an open recruitment process, one in which educators were invited to participate without my having prior knowledge of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The second model was chosen upon further reflection and due to advice provided by my major advisor. A maximum of ten participants were sought for the book club study through the Call to Participants Handout.

**Participant Recruitment**

Interested participants were required to meet one of the following professional requirements in keeping with Creswell and Creswell’s (2018) notion of criterion sampling: (1)
currently work as an educator in a secondary school; (2) are a preservice educator on track to work in a secondary school; (3) are a student teacher assigned to a classroom in a local secondary school; (4) are enrolled in a postsecondary degree program in an education department or related field with the ultimate goal to work in a secondary school. Interested participants who did not meet one of these requirements were invited to contact me and inquire about participating.

Based on my background in secondary English education and focus on the uses of YAL as subject of discussion, I initially sought exclusively high school English teachers from the LSU community and in surrounding parishes on my own. In tandem, the original title of the study was Rainbow Advocates: An Examination of Pre-Service and Practicing ELA Teachers’ Readiness to Navigate LGBTQ+ Young Adult Literature—as noted in LSU’s IRB Approval Form (Appendix A). At the advice of my academic advisor, the title and scope of the study itself were amended to be inclusive of all educators, i.e. administrators, teachers in other disciplines, librarians, and support staff, at the secondary level, as well as student teachers on track to work in a secondary level setting. The reason behind this decision was to not only be inclusive but to raise the likelihood for a diversity of perspectives on curriculum, educational goals and realities, among other things that different professionals would bring to such a study.

In early December of 2019, I began extending an early draft of the Call to Participants Handout to several past acquaintances and educators who I had met during my time as a doctoral student in the Curriculum and Instruction PhD program at LSU. This measure met with almost no success, prompting me to reach out to several veteran instructors from the English and education departments at LSU in late December. To my knowledge, these instructors respectively extended the handout to approximately three to five of their students. Like before,
this measure had very limited success as only one educator contacted me to express tentative interest in the book club study. Ultimately, this educator declined to take part. In February 2020, I recruited Ashleigh, a fellow graduate student at LSU with a similar background, to serve as a facilitator for the book club study and help in the recruitment process. Extending the handout to her, I requested that she invite no more than ten secondary-level educators to take part. By the end of March 2020, she had successfully identified and invited ten of her past colleagues and/or connections from LSU, East Baton Rouge, and in surrounding parishes, to take part. Nine of the educators she invited to take part in the study ended up doing so, reaching out to me via email and confirming their intention to participate by the end of May 2020. At that time, a consent form (Appendix B) was extended to each of them with the request that it be returned as soon as possible.

Among the anticipated downsides of this open recruitment process and of the book club model’s wide allowance of participants with only professional requirements being in mind was ending up with a disproportionate number of straight, cisgender educators. Paramount in the recruitment of participating educators was that their privacy was guaranteed with respect to identities given the sensitive nature of addressing and advocating for LGBTQ issues in the highly religious area of East Baton Rouge and surrounding parishes across Louisiana. The Call to Participants Handout ensured interested candidates that the Zoom meeting space would be password-entry only and that they would be referred to through the use of an alias in discussion/write-up of the findings.

Recruiting participants who met the professional criteria and had the time and availability to take part in the study, i.e. time to complete the readings and meet with the group, entailed confining the book club model to a small period of time; making the book club specific to
Summer 2020 was done in order to best accommodate the personal, i.e. family, and professional responsibilities of interested educators and the time-consuming nature of their practice. In response to the Coronavirus Pandemic, time constraints became even more relevant as professionals in schools dealt with shifting openings and closures, the need for hybrid/virtual learning, and the continued learning/growth of their students.

**Text Selection**

Research on book clubs recommends that text selection be a communal process rather than having one figure in charge of selecting readings (Álvarez-Álvarez, 2016; McCaughey, 2017). Bauman (1994) further notes giving moderators strict control constrains the “sense of democracy and equality” (p. 35) and restricts the community feel that is conducive to an effective book club. Sharing in text selection processes, on the other hand, creates a collective sense of satisfaction for the whole group (Bauman, 1994) and shows members their input is valued (Beach & Yussen, 2011). I thereby sought to demonstrate that value of community and collaboration while accounting for time constraints of participants; a list of seven titles that represented a diverse range of LGBTQ individuals, plots, and styles were listed for participants’ review in the Call to Participants Handout.

The seven texts outlined in the handout were chosen after an extensive review of LGBTQ YA titles from various sources. This review consisted of looking at the length of each text, their genre, year of publication, and the number of favorable reviews received. Exactly seventy-six YA titles were reviewed with these characteristics in mind through an exploration of bibliographic texts and the Lambda Literary Organization. Preference was given to works with 150 to 300 pages, fiction over nonfiction, award-winning and honored titles, and texts published
from 2010 to 2020. Awards cross-checked with the Lambda Literary category for young adult/children’s literature included the Stonewall Awards, Alex Awards, Edwards Award, Morris Awards, and Printz Awards. Bibliographic texts consulted included several co-authored by Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins, particularly *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature* (2018). After narrowing down the seventy-six titles to a total of twenty from these sources, I turned to Goodreads.com and read exactly five reviews for each. Initially, I intended to present the twenty texts to participants for review. At the advice of the facilitator, however, what I considered to be the best texts for representing individuals who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, gender fluid or non-binary, intersex, and asexual was chosen to minimize the number of potential readings that participants would need to review. The following seven titles were thereby presented to readers in the Call to Participants Handout with the request that they review the titles on Goodreads.com and alert me to which three they were voting for via email.
Table 3.1. Potential Readings for the Book Club

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>If You Could Be Mine</em></td>
<td>Sara Farizan</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Lesbian protagonist; Iran setting; Contemporary realism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>All Boys Aren’t Blue</em></td>
<td>George Johnson</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Black, gay male author; Memoir/manifesto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Not Your Sidekick</em></td>
<td>C.B. Lee</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Asian, bisexual female protagonist; Post-apocalyptic/superhero fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Gracefully Grayson</em></td>
<td>Ami Polonsky</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Transgender protagonist; Contemporary realism; Middle school grade book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Somebody Told Me</em></td>
<td>Mia Siegert</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Bi-gender protagonist; Contemporary realism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>None of the Above</em></td>
<td>I.W. Gregorio</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Intersex protagonist previously considered as female; Contemporary Realism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>We Awaken</em></td>
<td>Calista Lynne</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Asexual protagonist; Fantasy/magical realism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After reviewing the participants’ three votes, I tabulated the votes and presented participants with the three most-voted for readings in the Book Selection Meeting. After minimal discussion and a final vote, performed by a “show of hands,” the three texts with the highest number of votes were chosen as the readings for the book club. Once the three titles were chosen, I provided a copy of the three readings for each participant; purchasing the titles for each participant was
made possible through the generous support of my major advisor, who used funds from her Elena and Albert LeBlanc Professorship—a grant used in support of her students’ research.

**Data Collection**

Data collection for the book club study involved several tools that were both virtual and email-based. Virtual tools or methods were the Book Selection Meeting, Book Club Meetings 1 and 2, and one-on-one interviews with select participants of the book club study. These data sources were captured/recorded through Zoom and the subject of observations and field notes taken by me while they respective meetings took place. Email-based data sources included the Call to Participants Handout (Appendix C), the Participant Questionnaire (Appendix D), the School Climate Questionnaire (Appendix E), and the Teacher Education Questionnaire (Appendix F).

The Call to Participants Handout was distributed by the facilitator at the outset of the study to potential members. This document included links to Goodreads.com and the website’s synopses of the potential readings to allow them ease of access with respect to reviewing the titles.

The Participant Questionnaire called on participants to rank themselves in terms of knowledge, skill, or comfort on various categories/abilities related to LGBTQ affirmation in their work sites. The School Climate Questionnaire asked participants to share information about their school sites in terms of LGBTQ affirmation and inclusion. It looked at what bigotry/prejudice and stereotypes, if any, they can recall encountering in their position as educators from colleagues, administrators, students, or parents/guardians. Demographics such as population size,
racial/ethnic makeup, and the presence of out LGBTQ students and faculty was also touched upon to allow me to get a sense of their school.

The Teacher Education Questionnaire had participants reflect on their teacher education or alternative certification programs and what attention was given to LGBTQ materials and issues by instructors. Their certification or teacher education programs were used to generate a full picture of any differences in terms of geography and demographics.

Each of these tools aimed to look at a different facet of participants’ knowledge of LGBTQ themes and YAL, as well as their readiness to engage such materials with skill and comfort. Once data from each tool was compiled, it was reviewed, coded/sorted, and analyzed by me. The timeline used for this data collection is outlined in the table below.

Table 3.2. Timeline for Data Collection and Book Club Meetings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>June 1-30</th>
<th>July 1-30</th>
<th>August 1-30</th>
<th>September 1-30</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Hold Book Selection Meeting  
Hold first book club meeting  
Have participants complete Participant & School Climate Questionnaires  
Code data collected in first meeting, selection meeting, & submitted questionnaires | Hold second book club meeting  
Have participants complete Teacher Education Questionnaire  
Code data collected & file for later analysis | Hold third book club meeting  
Code data collected from meeting for later analysis | Hold private interviews with interested participants through Zoom  
Code data collected in interviews  
Begin analysis of all information from data sources |

*The first and second book club meetings were consolidated and took place on July 23, 2020.

In conjunction with these tools, my role as a participant observer and the field notes I take posed specific significance for this study; this role and field notes were used to help triangulate findings
and create a picture of where participants stand in terms of readiness and how effective are book
clubs with respect to professional development centered around LGBTQ issues.

My role as the participant observer draws on research focused on observation techniques
and ethnographies wherein the researcher doubled as a participant observer (Kennedy-Lewis,
2012; Labaree, 2002; Murry, et al., 2020; Spradley, 1980) in how I looked at body language,
members’ engagement with each other, and the tone of a conversation. Doing so enhanced my
assessment of how efficient the meetings were in terms of the quality and depth of discussions,
as well as interpretations of readings. Furthermore, taking on the role of a participant observer
alongside my role as the researcher helped me to see what worked for participants in terms of the
data sources and what was met with confusion, i.e. the School Climate Questionnaire’s inquiry
about LGBTQ stereotypes. Having this dual role led me to see what needed to be adjusted and
how; it helped shape other qualitative tools used in the study and my overall determination of
how ready members were to approach LGBTQ issues in terms of knowledge, skill, and comfort.
Guiding my observations in the field were a series of questions, including (1) In what ways does
the setting add to or detract from discussions?; (2) Is the setting recognized as a safe space?; (3)
Does a sense of community pervade the setting?; (4) What topics generate the most and least
discussion from members? Field notes were based on these questions. I sought to get the fullest
picture possible about the various pieces that contributed to the book club, i.e. the setting,
alongside my observations of participants’ interactions with each other and their transactions
with texts.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Analysis that drew on Rosenblatt’s concept of Reader Response Theory, i.e. what
participants took away from readings or projected onto a text, occurred throughout the study;
information gathered from this analysis was coded in the style endorsed by Saldaña (2016). This coding utilized “essence-capturing” (p. 9) terms that allowed for ease of access when sorting data into distinct categories. These codes include (1) Topics of conversation that emerge during book club meetings and other data sources (Topics); (2) Exchanges related to content/readings (Exchanges); (3) Reflections related to teaching and school climates (Reflections); (4) Participants’ personal and professional experiences with LGBTQ issues (Experiences).

After coding/sorting data into the respective categories, I began to craft a narrative and/or story of the participants and the book club experience. This narrative concluded with a critical assessment of the book club as a model for educators’ professional development with regard to a navigation of LGBTQ issues, themes, and content.

This coding system assisted me in building an easy-to-navigate write-up that served as the foundation for Chapters 4 and 5. The respective categories similarly allowed for ease of access during the editing and revision processes. The categories for analysis were chosen to ensure that a full, multifaceted picture of each participant and the book club itself was achieved in the subsequent chapters.

Topics refers to discernible patterns that emerge and their relationship to research on LGBTQ-themed YAL and intersection with professional development (Burbank et al., 2010; Merriam, 1998). Exchanges entails a detailed review of participants’ responses and exchanges during dialogue on the readings and what their comments, etc., indicate about their capacity to navigate various LGBTQ perspectives, experiences, and materials (Burbank et al., 2010; Flood & Lapp, 1994). Reflections centers on a review of participants’ responses and exchanges during dialogue on the role of LGBTQ issues, materials, and themes in school climates, including those of LGBTQ youth, and what their comments indicate about their capacity to create and sustain an
inclusive learning environment as teachers (Burbank et al., 2010). Experiences refer to a contemplation of how participants’ backgrounds, and their personal and professional identities intersects with responses to readings, discussions, and LGBTQ issues (Beach & Yussen, 2011).

Once these categories were sufficiently sorted, a narrative that drew conceptually on Rosenblatt’s Reader Response Theory (1978), was constructed around each with the intent to determine how ready each participant was to navigate LGBTQ issues, themes, and materials. Their respective and collective readiness was assessed in conjunction with an examination of the book club as a model for professional development.

After analysis of the data was completed and drafts of Chapters 4 and 5 had been constructed from that data, participants were invited to review what was written of them in accordance with Patton’s (2015) recommendation. I extended this opportunity through email and reminded each member that they had the right to ask that I amend or change what was written about them if they take exception to it and/or feel they were misrepresented in any way. I directed each of them to the alias that referred to them and invited them to share any feedback, questions, or concerns that they had about their depiction in Chapters 4 and 5. Of the nine participants, three members responded with excitement about the way I portrayed the book club study but didn’t explicitly address how they were individually depicted.

**Conclusion**

YAL with LGBTQ themes can’t be overestimated as a tool for both adolescent youth and the teachers responsible for affirming their identities and expanding their worldview, doubly so for educators. This makes the lack of training on LGBTQ issues and materials in teacher education and through professional development an unacceptable reality—one that calls for
significant attention in both practice and research. In designing this study and its methods, tools, and expectations, I aimed to work with a diverse, but small group of educators to rectify this situation locally. In doing so, I hoped to assess their knowledge of LGBTQ issues and thereafter pass along what I encountered throughout the study to other researchers, who in turn can replicate this study and address these issues in their work in a pay-it-forward manner. I furthermore hoped that both researchers and educators will draw some inspiration from the findings and data analysis explored in depth in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 4. DATA AND FINDINGS

Introduction

In this chapter, I begin with an introduction of the educators who took part in the book club study. I outline their professional roles in Table 4.1 and then a series of excerpts written in the participants’ own words, that clarifies their interest in taking part in the study. Next is a summarized review of the data sources that will familiarize readers with the respective materials and questions/prompts therein. Afterward is a description of the process I used to review data sources and a thorough description of results from those sources. Results from the data sources was separated according to themed codes (Saldaña, 2016), including topics, exchanges, reflections, and experiences. At the conclusion of the chapter is a list of themes that emerged from review of the data source results and how/if the results support or refute what is said of education, book clubs, and educator readiness in research. Lastly, a conclusion transitioning readers into the fifth chapter, wherein I discuss the results more thematically, will conclude Chapter 4.

Participants in the Study

Eight educators besides Ashleigh and I took part in the study. Of them, seven currently work as English language arts teachers and one as a school librarian. Four of these participants, Bree, Kristen, Mel, and Shelly, work in a traditional high school setting as English language arts teachers. Whereas Mel works in a rural community in Terrebonne Parish, Bree, Kristen, and Shelly work in East Baton Rouge. Three other educators, Caitlyn, Carol, and Erin, work as colleagues in a unique postsecondary setting that caters to youth of high school age in East Baton Rouge; in that site, Carol and Erin serve as English language arts teachers and Caitlyn as a
The final participant, Teresa, works as an English language arts teacher at an online school that caters to youth across the entire state of Louisiana. Their professional roles and other work-related characteristics are presented more fully in the table below to allow readers to see them comparatively.

Table 4.1. Participants’ Professional Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member</th>
<th>Professional Roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Ashleigh | Former ELA teacher in Terrebonne Parish (6 years)  
Supervisor of student teachers at LSU  
Working toward PhD in Curriculum & Instruction (English education) at LSU |
| Bree | ELA teacher in East Baton Rouge (3 years)  
Certified to teach grades 6-12 |
| Caitlyn | Middle/high school librarian (25+ years)  
Instructor at LSU  
Holds a PhD in Curriculum & Instruction & Master’s in Library Science |
| Carol | 11th & 12th ELA teacher (25+ years)  
Instructor at LSU  
Holds a PhD in Curriculum & Instruction (English education) |
| Erin | 10th grade ELA teacher (20-25 years)  
Holds a PhD in Curriculum & Instruction (English education) |
| Kristen | ELA teacher in East Baton Rouge (5+ years)  
Teaches gifted students in grades 9-12  
Has certifications in social studies and background as a librarian |
| Mel | 9th & 10th grade ELA teacher in Terrebonne Parish (25 years) |
| Shelly | 12th grade ELA teacher (25+ years)  
Teaches AP Capstone classes at her site |
| Teresa | 9th grade ELA teacher at an online school (25+ years)  
Working toward PhD in Curriculum & Instruction (English education) at LSU |

Of note is that each of the participants was previously acquainted with at least one of the other educators. Select examples of these past connections include how Mel conducted field work in Shelly’s classroom in the 2000s. Shelly was, in turn, a cohort of Caitlyn’s in the LSU Writing Project years earlier. Ashleigh, in particular, has connections to all of the members; this allowed
her to recruit them to the book club study with relative ease. Among these connections is that she served as a student teacher for Shelly and as the mentor teacher for Bree years later. Ashleigh likewise knew Mel as a colleague in Terrebonne Parish. Her interactions with the other members of the study arose naturally from being in proximity at LSU and attending many of the same events sponsored by the university’s Curriculum and Instruction program. These connections lent toward an easy camaraderie between many of the members and created a community-like feel. Their shared background as English language arts teachers and librarians familiar and use of YAL in their practice was supplemented by the fact that almost all of the participants identified themselves in the same way.

With the exception of Bree and me, each participant who took part in the study was a White cisgender woman who identified straight ally. Whereas I also identify as a White cisgender woman, I differ as I identify as bisexual. Bree, in contrast, is a Black cisgender woman who identifies as Queer in terms of sexual orientation; she elaborated on her identity in the Participant Questionnaire as Queer by explaining that she was “exclusively attracted to other women.” Her racial identity and LGBTQ identity were considered carefully when I analyzed her responses to data sources. I sought to avoid situating Bree as representative of Black Queer women and to simultaneously avoid overcategorizing the other participants into one identical group despite their shared background and identity as White, cisgender, and straight. The same guiding principle extended to my observation of them in relation to their upbringings and religious affiliations, if any.

Five of the participants identified themselves as being from rural areas in Louisiana, with all but one of these educators adding that their childhood/family life was conservative socially and politically. Ashleigh, Caitlyn, Carol, and Mel, in particular, referred to their religious
upbringings at various points and to their ongoing ties to the religions of Catholicism and Baptism. These religious ties did not to make them opposed to the inclusion or affirmation of LGBTQ individuals as many religious individuals are portrayed as being in the media. Instead, they spoke at numerous points about their need to find a way an equitable balance between religious freedoms for their students and students’ families, and the embrace of LGBTQ individuals in both an educational and social context in their regions of Louisiana.

I chose to share these descriptions of the participants’ backgrounds, connections with one another, and their religious ties in order to provide readers with a fuller picture of them as both educators and individuals. Presenting their characteristics is necessary in helping the reader to better understand them, their positionality in relation to LGBTQ YAL, and their approach of such titles and of LGBTQ issues in an educational context. Next, I offer the reader the opportunity to glimpse participants’ reasons for participating in the book club study; doing so is intended to not only allow the reader to get a sense of the participants’ positionality but to afford the participants the chance to speak for themselves about why they feel reading three LGBTQ YA titles and taking part in the study were worth their time. The excerpts that follow were edited only for consistency and grammar with no words being changed, thereby reaffirming that participants’ individual voices are of immense value in this book club study.

In Their Own Words

Ashleigh. I have agreed to facilitate this book club because it is a needed, necessary, and timely topic. I am also participating in the book club because I feel like I need to know more about LGBTQ YAL for numerous reasons—to recommend to my student teachers, to have better knowledge of issues within YAL, and because it is so needed for our students.
Bree. I am a Queer Black woman at a public high school here in Baton Rouge. I would like to gain knowledge and awareness of YA titles that feature or center Queer youth. I would also like to have a reading and learning community to have these important and necessary conversations as it pertains to the classroom and pedagogical practices.

Caitlyn. I am a school librarian serving 6-12th grade students. As such, I am always seeking ways to improve our library program and make sure our collection, our programming, and our climate meet the needs of all students. I am hoping to learn ways to integrate YA literature into discussions of LGBTQ themes and issues. I’m excited about reading and discussing three books I haven’t yet read to see how they can inform my own understanding and provide dialogue points for teens. With a current administration that I suspect would not be overly supportive of discussions of sensitive topics; I’m also hoping for guidance in that regard.

Carol. I am interested in participating in this book club mainly because I am always interested in reading and talking about books. Beyond that, I think that efforts to include the voices of authors and characters who represent a range of life experience is vital in an educational setting. Most importantly, it is refreshing to read books that show marginalized characters living normal lives in which their status as marginalized is NOT the most interesting or important aspect about them. I hope to learn about new texts and authors through participation in this study. I also want to talk with other educators regarding how their experiences and policies make their classrooms and libraries safe and inspiring places for all students.

Erin. I have met several LGBTQ authors at NCTE and ALAN conventions. I believe books are a great place to provide answers and experiences to students who feel they have no other avenue seek information for their questions or experiences. Also, given how our curricular
focus has been in other areas, I now realize I need to focus on refining my understandings and ability to integrate LGBTQ+ materials and topics into my curriculum.

Kristen. I hope to be more knowledgeable about LGBTQ titles for young adults. I would love to have and recommend titles for students looking for LGBTQ related novels. Anything I can do to make their time here more inclusive of them is something I like to set my mind to.

Mel. I enjoy reading books for leisure. I like the genres of YA and LGBTQ. I am an ally for LGBTQ teens, and I want to know about the books being written for these students. I hope to incorporate some of them into my classroom library. I want to be able to recommend books to students on the LGBTQ spectrum.

Shelly. I feel we owe our students the opportunity to view the perspectives of a wide variety of writers and a mix of texts from across time. We must offer them opportunities to express themselves. Across the texts we read, they should both see themselves reflected in the work AND be challenged to enter the experiences of people different from them. I also think it is essential to help them express themselves clearly in writing.

Teresa. I would like to be able to successfully include these themes in my classroom next year. I am hoping to gain guidance, knowledge, and a good start towards a classroom library including LGBTQ titles for my students.

**Review of Participants**

Their similar calls for learning, guidance, and insight into the selection and recommendation of LGBTQ YAL is indicative of their recognition of the need for more LGBTQ-themed literature in their curriculum. Similarly, their respective calls signal their awareness of the possibilities that including such texts in curriculum poses for LGBTQ and straight, cisgender students. That three-fourths of these participants are educators have twenty or
more years of experience yet seem unfamiliar with works of LGBTQ YAL reaffirms what I found in the literature review—that educators aren’t being trained on how to approach these materials or the issues covered therein. However, I must take into account that many earned their credentials in the early to mid-1990s, a time when YAL with LGBTQ themes was still in its relative infancy with few high-quality works published. Likewise, the inclusion of such materials in school sites was still underheard of and strictly taboo in the 1990s (Cart, 2016; Jenkins & Cart, 2018; Town, 2017) as opposed to being controversial in select climates today. Also evident is that each of the educators seems committed to the idea of learning and growth independent of their understanding and familiarity with LGBTQ YAL. This speaks to the shared, and sometimes unspoken, notion amongst educators that learning in terms of practice is a lifelong development. Their learning and what emerged in the data sources and throughout the book club discussions themselves adds to this belief about them as professionals. Simultaneously, it reveals considerable aspects of their personalities and abilities to embrace LGBTQ YAL despite still coming to terms with it on several fronts.

**Data Sources Review**

Seven data sources were used to triangulate a full picture of participants’ readiness to approach LGBTQ issues. Data sources for the book club study included video recordings and field notes/observations of the Book Selection Meeting, Book Club Meetings 1 and 2, and private interviews with the facilitator and three participating educators. Other data sources include participants’ votes for readings, submitted per instructions outlined in the Call to Participants Handout, and responses from participants questions in the Participant Questionnaire, School Climate Questionnaire, and Teacher Education Questionnaire. The Call to Participants
Handout and the respective questionnaires were extended through email and returned in a timely manner by most, but not all, of the participants. Meetings held through Zoom were recorded and later transcribed into word documents that were analyzed alongside the email-based questionnaires. Participants were given the email-based questionnaires at various dates throughout the course of the study.

In terms of content, the respective questionnaires drew on participants’ backgrounds and looked at their experiences with LGBTQ issues and materials from a variety of standpoints, such as while they were undergraduates in teacher education programs or after they’d earned their credentials and become educators outright. This was done in order to ensure as full of a picture as possible with respect to their readiness and as a way to compare thoughts/reactions voiced in Book Club Meetings 1 and 2 and private interviews with what they expressed in the questionnaires.

The Participant Questionnaire, the first to be extended to members of the book club study, called on them to rank their knowledge, comfort, and skill with LGBTQ materials, policies, and youth. The School Climate Questionnaire called on them to share relevant experiences with LGBTQ topics in their current or past workplaces. The Teacher Education Questionnaire prompted members to discuss their teacher education programs with regard to training on LGBTQ topics. Having participants complete these respective questionnaires was intended to assess how prepared they were to teach/work with LGBTQ themes and materials alongside youth in their professional role. It was likewise meant to delve into their teacher education or alternative certification programs to determine what relevant training, if any, they had with regard to LGBTQ materials and themes.
The Book Club Select Meeting and Book Club Meetings 1 and 2 ran approximately for sixty to ninety minutes each. Dialogue in each meeting was transcribed in full so that highlights, i.e. themes, key phrases, could be picked out and used in the Chapter 5 discussion. Transcriptions of the discussions in each meeting were used to analyze the usefulness of the book club as a means of teacher preparedness and participants’ individual and collective growth, if any occurred. Analysis of the transcriptions looks comparatively at the book club format as professional development and these participants’ shared backgrounds as educators reflect and/or refute what other scholarship on educators’ book clubs and of the realities that exist in education with respect to LGBTQ inclusion.

In late August 2020, after Book Club Meeting 2 had taken place, an invitation to be privately interviewed on their impressions of the book club was extended to all of the participants. Ashleigh, Erin, Kristen, and Shelly were the only individuals who replied to the invitation and consented to be interviewed. These one-on-one interviews ran approximately forty to sixty minutes each and touched on such topics as their impression of book clubs as a means of professional development, LGBTQ themes that went unaddressed in the book club discussions, and how teacher education programs can improve, among other topics. Highlights from these interviews were transcribed and used to assess what these participants said and their thoughts on what transpired in discussions, what they took away from the readings, and how they hoped to proceed in terms of practice with LGBTQ YAL. I thereafter examined what occurred in the interviews and how it compared to what was said in the group meetings. In turn, comments made in the interviews were used to examine the efficacy of the book club discussions and of book club as a means of professional development overall.
In conjunction with sharing the results of the respective questionnaires and what knowledge can be gleaned from transcriptions of the Book Selection Meeting, and Book Club Meetings 1 and 2, it was important to consider the participants’ backgrounds and identities themselves. Their individual backgrounds, teacher education or alternative certification programs, school sites, and viewpoints about LGBTQ topics, as well as the readings, were each factored into the discussion that follows in Chapter 5. Attention to their individual positions and identities was given attention in the subsequent chapter. Particular emphasis on their similarities and differences in terms of race/ethnicity, gender identities and sexual orientations, and generation or age is a leading factor in the Chapter 5 analysis.

**Analysis Overview**

Analysis of the data included a piece-by-piece ethnography-inspired review of the group discussions, various questionnaires, and interviews conducted Ashleigh, Erin, Kristen, and Shelly. I utilized Creswell and Creswell (2018) and their definition of ethnography by looking at how participants’ written responses and verbalized ideas either reflected or refuted a shared pattern of language and thoughts about education and LGBTQ YAL. I then identified how any patterns that emerged signified participants’ readiness or lack of readiness to approach and directly integrate LGBTQ YAL and topics into their practice.

The various data sources were analyzed according to the order in which they were distributed to participant and in conjunction with data sources they most closely resembled. I first analyzed votes for readings made by participants in conjunction with the Call to Participants Handout and then compared what was said of the seven titles in the Book Selection Meeting. Thereafter, I looked at the Participant Questionnaire, School Climate Questionnaire, and Teacher Education Questionnaire in comparison to one another. In examining these documents in tandem,
I looked at key terms and other word usage from each participant to get a sense of any similarities or differences in their way of speaking and thinking. Finally, I considered video recordings and field notes taken during Book Club Meetings 1 and 2 and private interviews with attention given to what participants verbalized and how they did or didn’t demonstrate readiness regarding LGBTQ YAL and issues.

Analysis of the votes for the three readings via the Call to Participants Handout and what was said in the Book Selection Meeting was a multi-step process that focused on comparing participants’ choices and comments about each of the nominated books. I began with a transcription of the Book Selection Meeting, highlighting key words related to their knowledge and comfort with topics covered in the most-voted-for books; next, I looked at what they verbalized about books that weren’t chosen and/or which received few, if any, votes. I did so to establish what texts participants found the most and least appealing as educators, what qualities or characteristics they looked for in new readings, and what LGBTQ topics participants were most and least knowledgeable and comfortable with. In turn, this process entailed looking carefully at participants’ comfort level. This comfort level was determined by the tone of the participants’ speech, willingness to leap into a conversation, and the language used. I looked at these illustrations of comfort or discomfort with respect to various LGBTQ identities, themes, and topics, to determine whether they were drawn to safe LGBTQ texts or wanted to be exposed to LGBTQ themes that remain underdeveloped and underexplored even in the context of LGBTQ YAL.

I turned to a comparative analysis of the three questionnaires following analysis of the results from the Book Selection Meeting and the votes that coincided with the Call to Participants Handout. The Participant Questionnaire, School Climate Questionnaire, and Teacher
Education Questionnaire were considered at length individually and thereafter compared with an in order to discern any similarities or differences between participants’ feelings towards LGBTQ YAL and its place in curriculum. Analyzing the questionnaires comparatively was intended to give me a sense of their individual experiences and whether these experiences were more similar or different with respect to LGBTQ topics/issues. I began by transcribing the longer responses, many of them anecdotal, and highlighted comments that indicated their beliefs about their past and present experiences as educators, taking special note of what they perceive to be an educators’ responsibility to students. Next, I highlighted any key words used in their responses, i.e. empathy, diversity, and inclusion, to note differences and similarities in the way they were used; doing so allowed me to glean how/if their teaching philosophy and training involved a more progressive or conservative stance. I used these two threads to further identify participants’ characters and views on LGBTQ topics. More importantly, their responses were used to better my understanding of their readiness, including their knowledge of their schools’ policies and stereotypes with respect to LGBTQ youth and materials, skill at meeting LGBTQ students’ needs and handling delicate scenarios, and comfort sharing personal and professional anecdotes.

Analysis of the book club meetings and the private interviews came next. Recordings of Book Club Meetings 1 and 2 and the interviews with Ashleigh, Erin, Kristen, and Shelly were instrumental in capturing a verbatim account of their comments. I began with a summary transcription of the respective recordings and took special note of key terms and comments again with attention on any notable similarities or differences. Key in this transcription was how I kept their comments true to their tone and style of speaking while maintaining consistency in the summarization of their comments. In addition, I took notes that highlighted participants’ body language, verbal tones, and facial expressions during key moments to try and discern what a
participant was feeling. I did so in order to get a fully-realized picture of their experience in the discussions and interviews, as well as to identify how their comfort compared to comfort demonstrated in their written questionnaires. With respect to knowledge and skill demonstrated in the meetings or interviews, my analysis involved looking and listening in particular to members’ uses of key LGBTQ terms, i.e. transgender, references to other LGBTQ YAL and YAL overall, and any remarks that touched on their practice with either LGBTQ youth or materials.

Examining these documents and what they signified in comparison to one another was a staple of the procedures I utilized to generate a full picture of where participants stood at the outset of the study, during it, and afterward. I likewise aimed to look at the various data sources thematically and see what they indicated in relation to research on this phenomenon. The various data sources first needed to be looked at individually before they could be examined in conjunction with one another; the same was true of the results that emerged from each data source. I looked at each result and coded it into four themes, i.e. topics, exchanges, experiences, and reflections, to allow for ease of access in the comparative analysis that followed. Results from the respective data sources and what they indicated about participants’ readiness, thoughts, and ideas are outlined below.

**Call to Participants Handout**

On June 1, 2020, a list of potential readings was sent out to participants. This handout served several informational purposes and called on participants to vote which three LGBTQ YAL titles they would prefer to read. Ashleigh, Kristen, and Teresa opted not to vote, instead replying they would be fine reading any of the titles proposed. Other participants followed through and voted not only for their preferred three titles but demonstrated interest in four or
more of the potential titles. Worth mention is that I took part in this vote from the standpoint of a participant. I chose to vote in order to help establish the sense of community I hope to see realized in the book club study and alert the other members that my role in respect to which texts were read was no more or less important than was theirs. The results of the vote are outlined in the table below.

Table 4.2. Participants’ Votes for Proposed Readings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Titles</th>
<th>Votes for</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>If You Could Be Mine</em> (2013)</td>
<td>3 (Alexis, Bree, Shelly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>All Boys Aren’t Blue</em> (2020)</td>
<td>6 (Bree, Caitlyn, Carol, Erin, Mel, Shelly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Not Your Sidekick</em> (2016)</td>
<td>4 (Alexis, Caitlyn, Carol, Erin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Gracefully Grayson</em> (2014)</td>
<td>4 (Caitlyn, Carol, Erin, Shelly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Somebody Told Me</em> (2020)</td>
<td>3 (Alexis, Bree, Mel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>None of the Above</em> (2015)</td>
<td>2 (Carol, Mel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>We Awaken</em> (2016)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of the participants was invited to review the above choices prior to our deciding on which to read for the study. Hyperlinks were included in the document mentioned above. For clarity, condensed synopses from Goodreads.com are provided (Appendix G) to alert the reader to what participants themselves read before making their ultimate selection of which three books to vote for. Also included are the genres and page count of each book.

Following submission of their votes, participants’ choices were tabulated and the texts with the highest number of votes submitted for participants final approval in the Book Selection Meeting that took place a few weeks later. My evaluation, or takeaways, from what I gleaned in my review of these votes and comments expressing enthusiasm or other emotions to the respective proposed readings are featured below.
Five bits of information stood out from the way participants voted after reviewing these synopses and other aspects of the books on Goodreads.com. These pieces of information include the following.

All Boys Aren’t Blue, Not Your Sidekick, and Gracefully Grayson, respectively feature a Black gay male, an Asian bisexual female, and a transgender middle-schooler. This may suggest that racial/LGBTQ intersections and transgender issues were the most appealing topics to participants.

None of the Above and We Awaken received two and no votes, respectively. This may suggest that most participants found their respective topics of intersex individuals and asexuality to be less appealing than the topics of racial/LGBTQ intersection and transgenderism.

Generational differences between the participants don’t make a difference in their taste in readings as participants from both groups voted for the same books (*note that selections for readings were very limited).

Bree and I voted for both If You Could Be Mine and Somebody Told Me, which touch respectively on LGBTQ identities in the Middle East and sexual assault of LGBTQ individuals. This might suggest just a similar taste in narratives and/or more attention to issues that the non-LGBTQ participants found to be less of note.

All Boys Aren’t Blue received more votes than any of the other titles; participants may have been encouraged by the unprecedented amount of Black Lives Matter protests taking place at the time and/or because of the high population of Black men, women, and children in various Louisiana communities.
Book Selection Meeting

The Book Selection Meeting was held June 18th with the goal to introduce participants to each other and finalize the three readings for the book club study. The meeting was our first face-to-face interaction with each other and began with idle chatter as participants. Once all participants were present, I prompted members to spend a minute introducing themselves, including identifying their professional role and school. Participants introduced themselves one-by-one, going in no specific order, until all members had introduced themselves.

I introduced myself and the duality of my role as researcher and participant-observer (Kennedy-Lewis, 2012; Labaree, 2002), briefly identified my goals in designing the study, and shared a little about my background professionally. Ashleigh described herself as the facilitator, identifying her role as being meant to pick up the thread of conversation if/when it faltered and helping to make the discussions a lively, enthusiastic event for all parties. She furthermore assisted by pulling up information on the various readings on Goodreads.com when questions about them were asked by participants.

Several noteworthy comments were exchanged in the context of our discussion of the various readings. After deciding on All Boys Aren’t Blue, Gracefully Grayson, and Not Your Sidekick, participants voiced enthusiasm for the choices. Caitlyn remarked on her excitement to have a variety of viewpoints and character types that we would explore after additional discussion of three choices was held.

I like that these three choices represent transgender, bisexual, and gay. It’s nice that there are three different perspectives there.

I asked participants about their expectations for the study and found that most were simply there in an effort to learn more about LGBTQ topics and ready to delve into reading LGBTQ YAL. Of the study itself, the participants demonstrated enthusiasm for the content and what it would allow
me as a researcher to discover about the field as it stood. Ashleigh offered a particularly motivating quote about the importance that drove home who the study was really for, explaining:

My first student who came out to me, I told him I was doing this study and he was surprised/enthused, sending her an emoji, of interest. He thinks it’s really great that we’re doing this.

The meeting ran for approximately forty-five minutes and concluded when the three readings were finalized. Before we respectively signed off, I prompted the participants to respond to a verbal exit ticket—a question that entreated them to share a humorous or inspirational anecdote about their time as educators, adding that it would be a regular occurrence in each of the Zoom meetings that followed. I furthermore intended to compare the discussion of the chosen readings to the results of the Call to Participants Handout. This discussion involved brief questions/prompts about their particular votes, including inquiries about what drew them to vote for particular books. The discussion revealed several themes of note, outlined below.

Participants’ chief interest was to explore the intersection between race, gender identity, and sexual orientation. They described *All Boys Aren’t Blue* and *Not Your Sidekick* as the most appealing because of what the cover artwork and synopses signaled about the respective main characters/narrators (more so than the plots). Select members added wanting to experience new cultures from a point of view different than their own and noted difficulty finding high-quality YAL that features LGBTQ protagonists of color.

The lack of interest in *If You Could Be Mine*, which follows a young lesbian of Iranian in Iran, was attributed to a few participants mentioning in the meeting that they’d read the title previously. Two members added that they found the synopsis offensive as the protagonist contemplates gender confirmation surgery not because they feel they’re in the wrong body but as a way to legitimize her romantic love for another female character. These participants specified
that they found the character’s motives to be offensive and potentially harmful to those who are actually transgender.

*Gracefully Grayson* was met discussed with the same amount of enthusiasm as *Not Your Sidekick* and *All Boys Aren’t Blue*. Four participants, among them Caitlyn, Carol, Kristen, and Shelly referred to the fact that the book is targeted toward middle-schoolers rather than teens made it somewhat appealing to them given their long history of reading primarily YAL for professional purposes. Erin added they were curious to see what differences, if any, the title had from YAL with transgender characters they’d read individually in the past. Their comments struck me as indicative of their desire to see how transgender youth in their preteens or childhood years are presented in readings marketed toward students younger than theirs.

Very brief discussions of the other books not chosen were held. Carol and Erin identified wanting to avoid books that featured anti-religious themes or which are too far removed from reality in terms of plot, as was the case for *Somebody Told Me* and *We Awaken*, respectively. Considering this, Mel and Kristen identified past difficulties that they’d had trying to teach other texts with themes that were perceived as offensive by parents/caregivers on religious grounds. The reluctance to engage *Somebody Told Me* and vocal admission of the difficulty that stems from accommodating religious beliefs or values was indicative of the participants’ ties to both religion and that of the community in which they all lived and worked. The few who did vote for *Somebody Told Me* identified it as being a fitting work with regard to fights against censorship but agreed it may be an issue for their students’ and their families given their religious backgrounds. This result suggests that most of the participants were inclined to err on the side of caution with text selection and the atmosphere in which they educate youth, in this case the highly religious state of Louisiana.
No discernable differences according to generation/age or professional background were apparent in the meeting. Participants from both groups and professional roles/occupations were all highly interested and motivated to explore the intersections of race, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Given the limited number of selections participants were able to choose from, differences in taste according to generation or age is difficult, if not impossible, to determine.

**Participant Questionnaire**

This questionnaire was sent out to participants in individual emails between on June 5th alongside the School Climate Questionnaire with a request that it be returned by June 20th. The Participant Questionnaire focused on learning more about participants’ knowledge, comfort level, and skill handling LGBTQ themes as educators. Prompts in the questionnaire looked at their knowledge of various LGBTQ topics, their comfort handling LGBTQ topics, and skill handling particular obstacles, i.e. parent or administrative pushback.

I defined knowledge in this context as an understanding of issues facing LGBTQ individuals, youth included, and a critical awareness of LGBTQ literature and education-focused research on LGBTQ youths’ experiences. Comfort was defined as an ease speaking openly with students, coworkers, and parents/families about LGBTQ topics and sharing personal views and backgrounds. Skill was defined by how well educators can integrate LGBTQ literature and educational research into curricula while meeting standards.

The questionnaire began by asking participants to rank themselves from 1 (novice) to 5 (expert) in terms of knowledge, comfort, and skill with regard to various facets of LGBTQ topics and literature. Their responses to the questions focused on knowledge, comfort, and skill have been condensed from multiple questions into a trio of categories. Their responses reveal things about both themselves as a group and with respect to individual reading habits/practices.
In terms of knowledge, both generations rated themselves as 4 or 5 in all but one prompt. Their high-rated areas include knowledge of LGBTQ literature, terminology, and issues facing LGBTQ youth. Participants’ ratings of their knowledge of state and school policies with respect to bullying and the freedom of expression was noticeably lower, with a few participants giving themselves a 2 or 1. This struck me as indicative of the fact that their training to date has given little attention to policies on LGBTQ topics. Their higher ratings, however, signal their firm belief in their knowledge of the source materials and of general issues facing LGBTQ youth.

The comfort section had a higher average than the knowledge section. Participants rated themselves with a majority of 3s and 4s, and some with 5s. Ashleigh and Bree gave themselves a few 2s in select prompts.

Participants’ ratings for the skill section were mixed. A majority gave themselves 4s and 5s at using research to inform practice, meeting standards, and creating bully-free zones. Their ratings were lower with respect to integrating LGBTQ materials into a curriculum. Participants tended towards 3s in this prompt and a pair giving themselves a 2 and 1. The lowest scores came from participants from each generation.

Participants were asked to describe in their own words what they hoped to accomplish by participating in the study in the subsequent section of the questionnaire. Two notable and almost unanimous calls for particular professional development emerged from their responses—none of which indicated difference of opinions in terms of generation. First is their shared desire to enhance their knowledge of LGBTQ YAL and of issues for LGBTQ youth; seven of the participants linked greater knowledge on these fronts to improved practice and bookshelf selections. Second is how all but three participants refer to wanting to find/join a learning community in which important conversations about LGBTQ issues and practice involving these
themes can occur. Caitlyn added her hope for guidance on how to handle unsupportive administrative figures.

Participants’ comments in this section range from being straightforward to enthusiastic to eloquent when describing their reasons for taking part in the study. Kristen offered a to-the-point description of her desire to grow her classroom library by incorporating more LGBTQ titles for young adults in the interest of being able to “recommend titles for students looking for LGBTQ novels.” Mel offered a similarly direct reason for taking part.

I am an ally for LGBTQ teens and I want to know about the books being written for these students. I hope to incorporate some of them into my classroom library and to be able to recommend books to students on the LGBTQ spectrum.

Erin expressed a similar need to be more inclusive and her hope that, by taking part in the study, she’d be able to enhance her classroom library and become more knowledgeable about LGBTQ YAL.

I believe books are a great place to provide answers and experiences to students who feel they have no other avenue from which to seek information for their questions…Given that our curricular focus has been in other areas, I now realize that I need to focus on refining my understandings and ability to integrate LGBTQ materials and topics into curriculum.

These calls for knowledge, skill, and community stand in contrast to their higher ratings of themselves in the various prompts, particularly with respect to knowledge of LGBTQ topics and literature. Results further indicate that they need training that focuses on state policies regarding LGBTQ rights and protections, i.e. antibullying measures. Incorporating professional learning communities into training should likewise be considered, as should tools to help LGBTQ educators to feel a sense of security and comfort when navigating pushback and other obstacles.
School Climate Questionnaire

On June 5th, participants were sent the School Climate Questionnaire alongside the Participant Questionnaire with the request that they each be completed and turned in by June 20th. In this questionnaire, participants were asked to complete short-answer questions about their respective school sites, i.e. relating demographics, without the requirement to name that site. These questions were intended to provide me with information about their workplaces and simultaneously have participants reflect on their work-related experiences with LGBTQ topics. Results included the following.

Eight of the participants, Ashleigh included, work in sites where the school faculty and student body is at least 50% White and of the middle to upper-middle class. In these sites, no more than 25-30% identify as Black or African American and no more than 10% as another race. Teresa, however, identified her student body as 70% White and 30% Hispanic/Latino and as “low-income.” All of the participant relate having very few of coworkers or students who are openly LGBTQ. In all, the nine participants related working with seven openly LGBTQ educators, twelve educators presumed to be LGBTQ, eleven students who are LGBTQ, and an estimated twenty students who are presumed to be LGBTQ. None elaborated on the race/ethnicity of such individuals. Three-fourths of the participants identified their students as being from conservative families, with all but two participants adding how such families are highly religious. Three participants conversely described their schools as liberal despite similar religious backgrounds.

Participants likewise shared a range of comments and descriptions of how LGBTQ topics, youth, and educators are treated in their sites. Carol related how the handful of LGBTQ teachers are her school site “neither hide nor discuss their sexuality” and that she “can’t really
say if these teachers face discrimination” as she’s “never heard anything negative about them from faculty or students.” Conversely, Bree revealed that her school site still has issues with respect to LGBTQ affirmation.

A good bit of the students are “woke” and aware of race, gender, and class disparities. I would not say the same for staff. Some adhere to [queer and trans] students’ chosen names. Some don’t. I don’t think they’re always accepting of some expressions of gender.

Teresa contended it is difficult to definitively speak about the struggles of either LGBTQ students or staff given the online/virtual platform of her high school and that they “rarely meet face-to-face.” She estimated that 20% of her site’s 3,200 students “struggle with gender identity or sexuality issues” and further noted that this comes about because of “parents [who] are highly religious and [whom] believe they can better control their children’s education.”

Discussing educators’ responsibilities, each participant emphasized the impact of literature and writing on a student’s development; they indicated the need to provide students with a diverse range of stories and ensure students see themselves reflected in readings. Additional responsibilities voiced by several participants included providing safe environments and opportunities for students’ self-expression through dialogue and writing. Most eloquent and powerful is Carol’s comment.

Stories save children. Now, more than ever, teachers in the humanities have a responsibility to humanize the issues that loom over the current political and social climate. It’s [our] job to seek out a diverse range of stories from a large spectrum of storytellers…so that students see their own faces reflected in the authors and characters that they read.

Similarly, Caitlyn identified how a librarian’s responsibility is of equal importance to that of the English teacher, contending that the goal of a librarian is to “help students become lifelong readers and learners, and effective users and creators of information.” She lamented how school
librarians aren’t given due credit as the “shoulder students in need lean on.” She elaborated on this.

I feel a great sense of responsibility to listen to students as they express concerns and to serve as a sounding board as they work through difficult issues. I try very hard to make our library a safe place for students to express themselves and to explore ideas, both within the curriculum and beyond—which frequently extends to their personal lives and identities.

Seven participants went on to share distinct stories about their work with the handful of LGBTQ youth they’ve encountered in their careers. These stories included a transgender student ending up on the street after being thrown out of their home, having a student come out to them as gay, seemingly out of the blue, and numerous other tales in which participants witnessed or heard of anti-LGBTQ bullying. Carol noted that “instances of bullying and homophobic speech often go unreported and/or unanswered” at her school site. However, she confided that “there is also a growing contention of vocal parents, students and teachers who resist the status quo and resist the existing policies.” All but one of these participants added descriptions of their efforts to prevent other negative treatment through direct and indirect action, i.e. incorporating classrooms with LGBTQ artwork and literature. Three members added the importance of recommending LGBTQ literature to all students, not just those who may or do identify as LGBTQ.

Most of the participants confess being unaware of the full extent to which anti-LGBTQ stereotypes, i.e. effeminate males as gay and sporty girls as lesbians, take place in their sites. Carol and Shelly each shared that they’re largely unaware and/or recognize themselves as being unable to speak to these issues. Shelly elaborated on this inability.

While I am sure there are stereotypes that exist, I have not heard any repeated nor do I know other people’s impressions. I do know that I find our school to be generally supportive. However, I do not know how it feels from the perspective of an LGBTQ student.
Among the stereotypes that they’re aware of include common assumptions that mirror those in mainstream media, i.e. that effeminate male students are gay and masculine girls are lesbians. Carol, for instance, noted several female athletes at her school site identify as gay and that a greater number of this group are assumed to be gay “even if they are straight,” again “playing to an old stereotype.” Caitlyn mentioned that negative stereotypes about the LGBTQ community exist at her school site but failed to elaborate. Teresa referred to stereotypes being less prevalent among educators at her site, noting that she was only able to speak to those with whom she’d had interactions virtually. Bree, meanwhile, confessed limited interaction with colleagues and other parties in her traditional school site, making her unable to speak to the extent of stereotypes and assumptions that might occur there. Her awareness of the intolerance of several coworkers in her school site, however, lends to the idea that stereotypes persist along with other forms of bigotry and prejudice in her school.

The members’ comments about their schools, coworkers, and student bodies indicate their awareness of anti-LGBTQ sentiment in those sites; yet, more than half of the participants contextualized treatment of LGBTQ individuals and themes in terms of generation—saying that persistent stereotypes about such things have become less and less apparent and/or voiced over time.

The slow death of stereotypes in their school sites signals progress but doesn’t address how the participants would/do handle them or other exclusionist language and behavior. Their similar responses regarding an educator’s responsibility to all students makes clear that they have similar philosophies and outlooks with respect to diversity, inclusion, and LGBTQ affirmation. Save Teresa, the similarities in the environments they teach in signals the need for more diversity
in their faculties and critical attention to how their sites hire educators and provide training on stereotypes, etc.

**Teacher Education Questionnaire**

The Teacher Education Questionnaire was sent to participants on July 6th with a request that it be returned by July 15th. The questionnaire included three multiple-choice and two short-answer questions that focused on participants’ experiences within their teacher education and/or alternative certification programs with respect to LGBTQ topics and relevant training on such issues. Results of the respective prompts suggest that none of the participants were adequately prepared to navigate these issues by their teacher educators or professors.

To start, participants were asked three multiple-choice regarding how often their professors/trainers performed a particular action relevant to LGBTQ-specific training. Each multiple-choice question gave participants the option of selecting often, sometimes, rarely, or never. The prompts and results included the following.

**Table 4.3. Responses to Teacher Education Questionnaire**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often did your professors/trainers integrate discussions on LGBTQ youth &amp; their experiences in or outside of school settings into coursework?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Often: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes: 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rarely: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never: 3</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>How often did your professors/trainers integrate LGBTQ literature into coursework?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Often: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never: 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often did your professors/trainers use affirmative language &amp; inclusive behavior with regard to LGBTQ individuals?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Often: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never: 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the second portion of the questionnaire, participants responded to a pair of short-answer questions that asked them to further reflect on their teacher education or alternative certification programs. The first question asked them what they wished their professors/trainers had done more of or differently. The second question asked them to reflect on what they were glad their professors/trainers had done well. Both the first and second questions were specific to the inclusion or affirmation of LGBTQ materials and themes.

Participants indicated their wish that the following had been different: Three-fourths of the earlier generation contended that discussion of LGBTQ themes was almost nonexistent and seen as a non-issue by a majority of their professors/trainers in both the mid-1990s. I looked at how generation influenced the use of terms and awareness of LGBTQ identities encompassed on the spectrum, among other avenues. Of note is that Carol said race and ethnicity were regular topics but that no mention of LGBTQ individuals was made. The later generation confesses having a similar experience, noting that there was a lack of in-depth discussion and preparation for approaching LGBTQ issues in their teacher education programs. A mix of the earlier and later generations both said that they’ve encountered intolerant language and ideas toward LGBTQ individuals, youth included, by professors/trainers in their teacher education programs and at various points in their subsequent careers (as recently as a few years previous). Shelly, Teresa, and Carol added that these instances in the 1990s included having teacher educators question why LGBTQ topics were perceived as a worthwhile discussion or why they would themselves be interested in addressing such themes. As a whole, participants’ responses mirrored those in research, wherein educators speak about the absence of LGBTQ-specific training and who call desperately for more attention to LGBTQ issues in education.
At the end of the questionnaire, participants elaborated on what they would’ve liked to have seen more of and/or handled differently. Kristen stresses the complete lack of discussion of LGBTQ topics in her teacher education program.

I wish the inclusive training had actually been inclusive in regards to the LGBTQ community. There was never a discussion on how to handle situations or confrontations that may be common when students come out or transition.

Similarly, Bree noted that her teacher education program left a lot of LGBTQ themes and materials unexplored and that she and her fellow future teachers weren’t encouraged to include seek such literature.

I didn’t like that I wasn’t teaching literature that LGBTQ could see themselves reflected in. I wish I could’ve known I had the option. Oftentimes, as a student teacher, you just do what your mentor teacher does or says.

She added that a “more nuanced approach” that covers “factors such as socio-economic status and family upbringing” and how it affects the experiences of LGBTQ youth should be covered in teacher education. Of a similar opinion, Teresa recounted how her own undergraduate degree left much to be desired; she explained encountering an especially intolerant group of individuals and community overall during her teacher education program. Earning her degree in North Louisiana during the mid-to-late 1990s, she shared how “heavily influenced” the region was by “[religious] denominations who believed homosexuality to be an abomination” and that her professors were little better than members of the community.

I found my major professor to be extremely intolerant of anyone who showed the slightest difference from the “norm.” We had an older, openly gay man in our English methods course who stood for what he believed in, whom she failed out of spite. She frequently lectured us about treating all students the same, no matter who they thought they were. That sounds like a good thing, but the way she implied it was not. She never spoke specifically about “homosexuality,” but it was deeply implied.
These anecdotes highlight that participants who earned their credentials as recently as three years ago and far back as the 1990s encountered a similar avoidance of LGBTQ issues in their teacher education program. Their experiences mirror what researchers have found in their exploration of teacher education programs.

Participants were glad that the following elements were a part of their training: Six participants related similar anecdotes in which a single teacher educator they had demonstrated affirmative LGBTQ language and either a direct or unspoken commitment to diversity through readings and/or activities. In one such instance, Select remembers recall being assigned LGBTQ novels and anthologies in the 1990s, i.e. Nancy Garden’s *Annie on my Mind*. Each of the members emphasizes how even reading one work of LGBTQ fiction and getting to discuss it in a safe space proved impactful on their ability to empathize with LGBTQ individuals and experiences. Of the six, a handful add that they were encouraged by professors to seek out additional LGBTQ readings for both leisure and professional purposes by professors/teachers. Similar motivation includes being given select tools by professors/trainers with regard to developing curricula to be more inclusive, i.e. being trained to look at who is left out of a curriculum, ways of managing censorship, etc.

Addressing her graduate degree and training from LSU, Teresa commends professors for being not only more “tolerant,” but affirmative of LGBTQ youth and adults, notably through being required to read LGBTQ YA titles *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B* and *The 57 Bus* and identifying those who have been consistently marginalized in curricula.

When I started here at LSU, one of the first classes I took was [a] curriculum theory class. It was here [the professor] taught me her ever-popular question, “Who is being left out?” [They] taught me, essentially, to question everything and push for who was left out whether it was on the basis of sexuality, race, gender, faith, or anything else.
Teresa further exclaims how her graduate training “set off a cavalcade of reading” and instilled in her a determination to “bring down ignorance and discrimination.” She adds, “While I may not have to personally had to fight these battles, I can fight the injustice.” Bree offers a similar inspirational comment that readers should take to heart. Of the things she is glad for is that some professors in her teacher education program did emphasize the possibility of having LGBTQ students and enter into moderate discussions of what to expect.

I was glad they mentioned this because future educators need to know that they won’t always teach students that look like them or come up in the same environment as they did. And they need to be prepared for that.

The similarities in their teacher education programs with respect to LGBTQ issues and the inclusion or exclusion of materials with such themes can’t be perceived as a mere coincidence or as an isolated phenomenon. Per the takeaways that follow, I offer an extended look at the similarities that emerged between participants in responses to the Teacher Education Questionnaire’s prompts.

The results in the first portion of the questionnaire indicate a majority of the participants had similar experiences despite differences in generation and/or the time period in which they earned their degrees/credentials. With few exceptions, their respective teacher education programs were characterized by minimal discussion of LGBTQ issues and a lack of attention to LGBTQ materials and practice-oriented tools. That each of the participants calls for additional training is noteworthy; despite their ratings in the previous questionnaire about their knowledge base call in particular for both a broad and topic-specific approach to LGBTQ literature. This indicates that, despite a 10-20-year gap in their respective training, little advancement has been made overall in training programs in/around East Baton Rouge and surrounding parishes.

Additionally, the comments made by each of the participants showcase their belief that diversity
should be significantly more highlighted than it is in teacher education programs, with five of them saying outright that there must be a celebration of diverse identities and the necessary tools to accomplish such a feat.

**Book Club Meeting 1**

The first official meeting of the book club took place July 26th and ran approximately ninety minutes. It consisted of a brief conversation about everyone’s daily lives in the midst of the Coronavirus Pandemic and the first two reading selections, *Gracefully Grayson* and *Not Your Sidekick*. Discussion of *Gracefully Grayson* took approximately fifty minutes and *Not Your Sidekick* took thirty minutes, with conversation returning *Gracefully Grayson* near the end of the meeting. Select topics of discussion for *Gracefully Grayson* included its balance of plot and character, the title character’s gender struggles and family dynamics, and real-life connections to the issues Grayson’s teacher faces. Select topics of discussion for *Not Your Sidekick* included its narrative quality and sequence, its handling of the superhero genre, and its depiction of bisexual and transgender characters. Our conversation began with a brief check-in segment, in which participants exchanged idle chatter and discussed their experiences in the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests and the Coronavirus Pandemic.

Once all participants had signed into the Zoom meeting space, Ashleigh launched discussion with the open-ended question, “What did y’all think?”

Each participant responded to *Gracefully Grayson* with enthusiasm and rated it highly; everyone applauded Grayson for featuring a simplistic plot, being character-driven, and for its equal attention to the protagonist’s struggle with gender identity and the themes of family dysfunction and friendships. Carol and Kristen offered especially enthusiastic and heartfelt reactions.
I loved that book; it didn’t feel heavy-handed. It didn’t feel didactic. It didn’t feel like ‘well, I’ve never struggled with gender, so this book has nothing to offer me’. It felt like any middle school-age coming of age book. –Carol

I felt like it was so gentle in the way that the book discussed her identity and how it illustrates Grayson working through her transition toward the end. I don’t think any kid who reads that would be opposed to Grayson, whatever their thoughts or feelings may be toward LGBTQ community. –Kristen

Early discussion of the book dealt with both the text itself and what connections the members made as readers to their own professional and personal lives. Teresa shared a noteworthy anecdote about a former student who began identifying as the binarial opposite gender and the reaction that ensued.

I saw parents hating this kid for being and saying who they were on the inside. The poor thing got kicked out of their house, in fact. So, this was a very eye-opening reading for me—getting to live on the other end of this scenario.

Discussion of Grayson’s transition and the book’s treatment of secondary characters, particularly Grayson’s aunt and teacher-mentor, Mr. Finn, were a key part of the conversation. Chief is how all participants voiced empathy with the teacher/theatre advisor in *Gracefully Grayson* as he dealt with pushback from Grayson’s aunt and their community. Grayson’s aunt was initially perceived as something of an antagonist based on the comments which participants voiced about her character. Stepping in, I prompted them to consider the aunt’s point of view by playing devil’s advocate and saying that I would myself hesitate if a child I perceived as being male were beginning to demonstrate behaviors perceived as feminine. This sparked a new thread of discussion and several comments of note. Among them was Caitlyn’s comment:

I have a nephew who has started to tell us that they’re a girl. I’m watching my mother and his mother deal with the same things Grayson’s aunt and uncle are. The ‘mama bear’ instinct has kicked in for my sister, making her ask herself ‘What are people going to
Kristen and Mel, in contrast, remained committed to faulting Grayson’s aunt for trying to protect her own way of thinking rather than Grayson herself. Respectively, they elaborated by pointing out that the aunt was “trying to protect her own standing with her people” and “acting in her own interests.” Erin echoed their sentiment by rhetorically posing the question, “Who was really being protected by the aunt’s actions?” Several participants, among them Carol, Caitlyn, and Ashleigh, chimed in and emphasized their belief that it was the aunt’s own bigoted thinking, rather than Grayson, that the aunt was really concerned with protecting. Ashleigh added that it was very similar to the censorship of materials in a classroom setting.

Soon after, Ashleigh posed a question we had discussed bringing to participants at an earlier date, “Would any of you teach this in your classroom?” This launched another new thread of discussion and spurred participants to think seriously about their professional practices and share bits and pieces of efforts they’d taken in the past. Kristen, Mel, and Erin indicated that they’re locked into a scripted curriculum which involves strict guidebooks by their parishes/school sites. At the same time, they, as well as them Carol, Caitlyn, and Teresa voiced their intention to put the titles, *Grayson* included, on their bookshelves. A handful added their intention to recommend them to students they feel may be interested in reading such texts.

Returning to the topic of scripted curriculum, six participants voice their dissatisfaction with often being unable to integrate new titles into their lesson plans. At that point, Teresa hesitantly added that it isn’t just a scripted curriculum which would prevent her from teaching such a book. She shared that she previously tried to teach *Fahrenheit 451* and had parents “throw a fit” because the text refers to a pornographic magazine. Only a few in the group expressed surprise at the comment, with several other members nodding slightly to suggest their lack of
surprise and/or similar experiences they might’ve had in the past. Teresa elaborated on this by expressing her frustration, saying “It wouldn’t fly. And I hate that.” In place of being able to teach the text directly, she mentioned using a link on her virtual classroom’s webpage/site that connects students to a list of books and descriptions that they can make use of if they want to. Expressing gratitude for the study, she added that she’d already added *Gracefully Grayson* to the site. Applauding her decision, three other participants remarked on the need to cater to the whims of community figures without losing complete control of their classrooms. This sentiment was one of the many that participants agreed upon in Book Club Meeting 1.

Dissenting opinions and reactions to the *Gracefully Grayson* were limited aside from members’ opinions of Grayson’s aunt and her methods and behaviors toward Grayson. Participants from the two generations were generally of the same mind and feelings about the various components of the book. This extended to real-world connections sparked by various elements of the book. Each of the participants rooted for Grayson to embrace her true gender and be an accepted part of their school community and theatre department. This extended to their reference of being allies for real-life transgender youth and a thoughtful discussion of the trials that such youth face in their school settings, i.e. issues related to bathroom usage, being bullied and harassed, and more. With the exception of a few pronoun slips in reference to Grayson’s character, none of the participants demonstrated difficulty getting their thoughts about transgender identities and trials across. Throughout the first half of the discussion, Bree was invited in private chat to participate by me and verbally by Ashleigh; in both instances, she politely replied that she instead preferred to listen to the conversation rather than take part in it actively.
At just over forty-five minutes into the meeting, Ashleigh turned the discussion toward *Not Your Sidekick* by asking if participants were ready to move on. After participants agreed, she asked for their thoughts on the reading in an open-ended manner but added that she’d “heard some rumblings” about the title from others through text messages and other forms of communication outside of the meetings. Each member communicated being overall dissatisfied with the book and, at times, even finding themselves to be angry while reading it. Carol criticized the improbability of the very premise.

I really got mad over the fact that after WWIII, after cataclysmic destruction, after the collapse of world government and the economy, the English AP program still exists?

Discussion of the book’s specific elements began in earnest with an exploration of its target audience. Ashleigh expressed her belief that it was more of a middle-grade book than *Gracefully Grayson* despite *Not Your Sidekick* being a YA book according to Goodreads.com. She attributed this to both the style of the writing and the focus on superheroes, linking it to the comic book staple of superhero fiction. Mel claimed that she had a similar issue with reading the text as YA given the quality of the writing, as well as finding it difficult to get invested in the story because of a disinterest in superhero fiction.

Particularly criticized was its “predictability” in terms of plot. Shelly and Carol both verbalized feeling angry about how predictable the plot overall was; particularly, they took exception to the way that the protagonist failed to grasp why that her crush and a mysterious superhero vigilante were never in the same place at the same moment, further noting the overplayed nature of this trope in superhero fiction. Erin likewise found fault with the plot, instead arguing it was attempting to put too much into the story.

This one had too many boxes that were being checked. Maybe it was me and my preconceived ideas, but I didn’t even realize that
[the protagonist’s] friend was transgender until midway through the book. I got confused at several points about what was taking place and who was who.

Erin furthermore lamented how the book was a “missed opportunity” that could’ve bridged LGBTQ content and that of the superhero genre.

Character development and the representation of LGBTQ identities was another point of contention for a majority of the members. Shelly noted that she felt resentful about a secondary character in the book being gender-fluid character’s superpower being chameleon-like abilities that allowed them to switch back and forth from male to female bodies at will. “That felt almost insulting to me,” she noted. Carol agreed, noting that the book seemed to sacrifice quality merely to fill a void in LGBTQ YAL.

It panders to bisexuality and gender fluid identities; it seemed to want to fill a spot on the bookshelf. I can’t stand it when an author sacrifices quality just to fill a vacancy on the LGBTQ spectrum. There are so many authors and stories that do it better than this.

Several participants, among them Kristen, Caitlyn, and Ashleigh, agreed, saying in various ways that they felt the book was didactic.

Of the few things that participants found appealing about the book was that it normalized the protagonist’s bisexuality. Mel offered a description of how she felt about the author’s portrayal of bisexuality.

Their environment seemed to say “okay, you can be this.” The conflict wasn’t their sexuality or gender identity, it was the superhero subplot. It was nice to read a book that didn’t problematize it, nice to see that not every book about LGBTQ characters is about the identity struggle. If I was a LGBTQ teen, the book would give me the sense of just being able to be me without it being an issue.

Caitlyn and Teresa agreed, relenting enough to say that it was one of the very few highlights in the text. Teresa added that it gave her a feeling of hope for future generations in respect to seeing
similar portrayals of normalized bisexuality, provided the books in question are written better than *Not Your Sidekick* was.

My observations of participants throughout the discussion were numerous and enlightening. Of particular note was that members of both generations demonstrated slight difficulty with preferred pronouns, at several instances referring to Grayson with male pronouns. *Not Your Sidekick* was found to be too slow to develop with over half of the participants criticizing the slow progression and predictably of its plot. *Not Your Sidekick* was furthermore criticized for featuring a character who can flip-flop between a male and female body, seen as offensive to transgender people by participants. On the other hand, it was applauded for its normalization of bisexuality. Participants offered little detailed commentary on the characteristics and personalities of the main and secondary characters beyond the issues they represented.

Of *Not Your Sidekick*, no empathy nor real-life connections were mentioned. Several participants added their disinterest in superhero fiction and mentioned finding it difficult to relate to as the genre tended to be too outlandish for their liking. This feeling was voiced by Shelly in particular, as well as members of the book club study who had held initially voted for it. Key in this dissatisfaction with the title was a question asked by Carol, “*Why?*” In general agreement with this question and the sentiment about the book overall, four participants confessed that they felt there was little reason to recommend *Not Your Sidekick* to any of their students. The nature of their comments and the tones aimed at *Not Your Sidekick* were thus very different from the earlier tones and comments that surrounded discussion of *Gracefully Grayson*. Similarly, the conversation styles of participants were, in general, very mixed despite shared feelings towards the respective books.
Participants’ conversational styles and ways of responding to dialogue in the discussion were mixed. Initially, participants seemed inclined to speak from the heart rather than a practical or education-related standpoint in both discussion of *Not Your Sidekick* and *Gracefully Grayson*, with talk of practice utilizing the two texts being reserved for the final thirty minutes of each discussion. Caitlyn and Carol were the most vocal participants and the two most experienced educators in the group with the highest number of years as educators. There was only a moderately discernible difference in terms of generation with who turns speaking or voicing their opinions about the two books. Participants with approximately twenty-five or more years of experience as educators seemed more inclined to jump into the conversation while participants with relatively less experience waded into the conversation more gradually. Notable is that Erin was given to raising her hand and often backtracked the conversation to a thread that had passed by some minutes before when she finally spoke.

The nature of Book Club Meeting 1 helped establish the rituals, i.e. icebreakers and exit tickets, for Book Club Meeting 2 and served as a way to get to better know where participants stood in relation to the issues discussed in the two readings. Likewise, the atmosphere that pervaded the first discussion helped to shape my expectations for Book Club Meeting 2, as well as helped me to decide on which aspects of dialogue and mannerisms, i.e. body language, were worth extra attention in the second meeting.

**Book Club Meeting 2**

Discussion of the third and final book, *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, took place on August 23rd and ran for approximately ninety minutes, sixty of which addressed the book and the responses it caused. Teresa and Bree were absent from the meeting as they respectively had work and personal obligations. The official discussion began after members were greeted and a brief
discussion of the Coronavirus Pandemic and its continued impact on participants’ lives was had. Select topics of discussion included the emotions the book inspired, its target audience, its representation of the intersection of Blackness and Queerness, its use in classrooms and libraries, and its narrative quality. Members’ fluctuating comments and shifts from one topic to the next ironically mirror the back-and-forth nature of the memoir itself.

Participants initially demonstrated a hesitancy to be the first to speak; this hesitancy gave way to an invigorated discussion thanks to a short exchange between Ashleigh and Mel with respect to the book’s intended audience as adolescent readers and status as YAL. Ashleigh launched this thread of the conversation with her opening remark that *All Boys Aren’t Blue* left her feeling “feisty” and confused as to who the target audience was. Mel responded quickly with a mix of surprise and enthusiasm, in turn creating a lively exchange between them.

**Mel:** *I didn’t feel that towards him at all.* What do you mean?
**Ashleigh:** I was feisty toward the beginning because I know this is a YA book club and I [wondered], ‘How YA is this?’
**Mel:** Did you finish it? I feel like it was really clear who it was for. He wrote it for young people. The young people who don’t have someone to look at and think ‘oh, that’s me.’ I feel like he didn’t have a model for what he was or how he was, and so he wants to be that person for young people.
**Ashleigh:** I felt that toward the later chapters, less so at the start.

Ashleigh concluded this exchange and subsequently launched a new thread by prompting members to consider what might make the book appealing to teens. Carol leapt into the conversation at that point and offered an impassioned response outlining her feelings about the book overall, touching on its genre, style, and content simultaneously.

**Memoirs are always a messy because they’re incomplete.** I like that the episodes he reveals and narrates aren’t finished. It shows that things in his life are still in progress [for him]. It shows feelings and conflicts that he’s still trying to reconcile, and that these things are complicated and tell some really heavy-hitting stories about the difficulty of being both Queer and Black.
She connected her comments to the afterword, including reading an excerpt aloud to the group. After reading the excerpt, she reiterated the author’s explanation that the book is meant to be useful to young people who are trying to make sense of their identities and navigate difficult aspects of their lives. Carol added, “for a guy who’s still pretty young, there’s some very wise words in [the book].” Ashleigh agreed, saying her chief concern was that, without the afterword, the book’s intended audience would’ve remained unclear to her and, she argued, other readers. Prompted by further mention of the afterword, Kristen, Mel, and Shelly all endorsed the importance of it and of the book overall for teenage readers, saying respectively:

I thought [the afterword] was really important as most books that kids will read don’t cover things like this. Abuse and all that. –Kristen
Those things are happening to kids. And they’re having the same feelings as the author. He’s putting it out there for them, saying ‘hey, you’re not alone’. Even if the subject matter is ‘touchy’. –Mel
Students want some of that sexuality in their reading. Because so many [adults] are uncomfortable talking about it [with them], they think ‘who’s going to tell [us]?’ –Shelly

Conversation flowed naturally toward the role of an educator with respect to preparing and/or providing students for recognition of sexual situations through literature at that point. Several noteworthy exchanged occurred, in which participants voiced their frustration with their own educations on the topic of exposure to sexual situations in fiction. Ashleigh, Carol, Caitlyn, and Shelly then referred to the schools they’d attended as teenagers, among them a mix of public and private, religious-affiliated schools in various parts of Louisiana. They commented in various amounts on their disbelief that the narrator would’ve received any form of sex education while attending a Catholic high school. Caitlyn specifically acknowledged that this bothered her somewhat but conceded that “artistic license” has a place in memoirs if the purpose of it is sound
and/or of help to other readers. Carol best contextualized their experience as a majority of their high school years were in the 1980s and earlier.

Yet, the consensus is that little has improved in terms of allowing students to explore texts with sexual descriptiveness. Ashleigh and Kristen, approximately 10-15 years younger than Carol, Caitlyn, Erin, and Shelly, shared that their high school years in Louisiana schools likewise featured almost no discussion of LGBTQ texts or issues. Mel picked up this thread and voiced the idea that if straight, cisgender readers continue to receive little to no information on sexuality in high school, what must it be like for teens like the narrator?

Some [LGBTQ] don’t even get [that much]. Someone like him is not getting any education about what sex is going to be like. That was something that made me think; it made me think that he probably had no role model aside from the Internet.

Following this comment, Erin and Carol shared similar anecdotes about the value of introducing discussion of sex ed or its parallels in their classrooms. Erin noted that each year she asks students who have been given “the talk” by parents/guardians in preparation for teaching materials that allude to or contain sex outright. Each year, she added, less than half will raise their hand. Carol shared that parents of her students have gotten “bent out of shape” at numerous points with regard to the inclusion of any sex in the curriculum. She nevertheless argued that such topics are important for teenagers.

We’ve gotta turn to the books and YA authors who are willing to be vulnerable, authors and books who present situations as close to real life as we can. As educators and grownups, we’re failing these kids.

In response, I asked the group, “Do you think you could get away with teaching All Boys in your school?” I emphasized having students encounter the explicit language and descriptiveness of both the sex and abuse scenes in conjunction with the question. Immediately, several members
shook their heads with facial expressions that demonstrated a mix of resignation and frustration. Mel, Shelly, and Kristen were the most vocal in this thread of the conversation, talking at length about their inability to teach *All Boys Aren’t Blue* not only because of scripted curriculum guidebooks they have to follow but because of the anticipated backlash they’d receive. Mel and Kristen respectively shared instances in which they’d encountered such backlash for teaching or attempting to teach controversial titles in the past, as well as witnessed what happened when students had run-ins with objections to their affirmation of LGBTQ identities and themes. Mel voiced being especially frustrated with politics and policies that mirror the exclusion or censorship of titles perceived as controversial.

A few years ago, we had a cultural club of sorts, very student-led, that wanted to do an LGBTQ Pride Week event; they wanted to make posters and do little things to recognize and celebrate the LGBTQ members of the school, but the principal told them ‘no, you can’t do that.’ No celebrating it, no mentioning it. And I remember thinking “my God.”

Ashleigh followed up with her on this comment, inquiring if there were any community-based gay/straight alliances in Mel’s community. Mel replied with some sense of certainty that there weren’t. Shelly concurs, saying it isn’t widely accepted in her community either despite how her school is slightly more liberal than the surrounding community. Nevertheless, Shelly revealed that a number of her colleagues took exception to a Day of Silence which the school’s GSA members took part in. Shelly recounted overhearing a fellow teacher voicing disrespectful language and demonstrating animosity toward the GSA members as a result of the Day of Silence. Participants’ increasing amounts of anecdotes and coinciding comments on these realities eventually circled back to whether or not the participants would teach *All Boys Aren’t Blue* or, in Caitlyn’s case, work it into her practice as a librarian. Shelly admitted that despite the relatively liberal nature of her school, she wouldn’t be able to teach the memoir/manifesto
without some fallout occurring. Her remark illustrates a sense of awareness of her school climate that can be read as illustrative of her readiness knowledge-wise, even if the title itself can’t be integrated directly into her curriculum.

Because *All Boys Aren’t Blue* is so matter-of-fact, I feel that people would almost hate it more than they do the violence of something like *Kite Runner*. So, its one that I would have in my back pocket if I had a kid who was struggling. I’d be subtle about giving it to them. ‘Hey, have you seen this book? I’ll put it down over here in case you want to look at or borrow it.’ I hate to think it would have to be that surreptitious, but I think it would probably need to be.

Allowing this thread of the conversation to play out naturally, I found that each of the participants present in the meeting agreed that they’d happily include the book in their classroom/library but wouldn’t be able to teach it directly. Some referred to the possibility of teaching or recommending chapters of Johnson’s book that don’t feature sexually explicit or abuse-heavy scenes. Yet, even that is identified as having the potential for either parent or administrator backlash by all of the participants. This lends to the impression that although they know how to navigate their school sites, they’re not yet ready to face backlash and/or that their school sites, as well as the communities they reside in, aren’t ready.

Once that thread had come to an end, discussion turned toward the narrator’s depiction of how his race, sexual orientation, and gender identity and/or gender performance intersected. I prompted this thread myself by asking, “What stood out to you about how the book intersects race, sexual orientation, and gender?” Mel was the first to weigh in with a comment showing appreciation for the book. She applauded the text as one of the very few LGBTQ YA titles she’d read that features a Black narrator/point-of-view character, recognizes a Black community, and is written in memoir form.

This was a really good book for me to read because it showed me
how [LGBTQ] issues connect to the Black community. It showed me how his experience was different from some of the others’ I’ve read. I felt like, in his community, they were more accepting. I really related to what he said about his family; a lot of his family members are gay and so are mine. My grandmother was a lesbian in the 1960s when it just wasn’t done. So, I can connect with him about that.

Carol similarly applauded the author/narrator for how he presented his struggles and what it can convey to other Black youth who are either LGBTQ or straight, cisgender. She specifically commended George Johnson for his emphasis on still being in the midst of figuring out these struggles and intersecting parts of himself.

He sees himself as an intersection of conflicting pieces and parts. And, like him, nobody’s figured it out entirely. And I really appreciate that. So, it’s not just a coming of age of identity and about who he is, how would he describe himself, to whom is he attracted, that sort of thing.

Ashleigh indicated her agreement with Carol’s comments about the power the book may pose for younger readers who identify as both Black and LGBTQ. She added that she was “surprised by the way that his family handled his queerness” as they demonstrated “a degree of sympathy and care” when interacting with him. Erin agreed that it was a refreshing change of pace from a majority of what is seen in fiction marketed toward teenagers.

As far as the idea of race and being gay here; whenever you see it in the media, the gay characters are never black, but when you see it, the straight black males are almost the most hard on the gay family member. So horrible. There’s not a lot other than [the TV show] Pose, you never see anyone besides gay white guys.

Carol jumped back in and referred to what she’s seen in reality as opposed to fiction.

There’s a real dearth of representation of gay characters in terms of race and life experiences and class. But Black families, some just rally around that family member despite their overall feelings about gay people.
Mel indicated agreement and her feeling that most of the White people/families she encounters in reality and fiction respond in the opposite way. She referred back to Grayson’s aunt showing a lack of support and/or targeting Mr. Finn and Grayson herself as opposed to showing support. Their comparative discussion of Black and White families and of how they’re respectively portrayed in YAL indicated a sense of being on the outside looking in for the former. On the other hand, Mel and Caitlyn demonstrated an effort to put themselves in the shoes of a Black mother and/or Black family member by referring to their own personal and professional experiences.

Following this thread, a prompt from Ashleigh led participants to look at the quality of the book. She accomplished this by asking participants to talk briefly about their overall thoughts about the book in terms of narrative style, pacing, genre, and other elements of note. This led several to reiterate that they either planned to put it on their classroom bookshelves or library, in Caitlyn’s case, but not teach it directly. In turn, Caitlyn, Carol, and Kristen alternately took turns discussing the “structure” and “craft” of the memoir/manifesto. Caitlyn noted that the “story is valuable for its story and not its craft” whereas Kristen praised the author for the back-and-forth episodic structure of the text. The three participants likewise applauded the author’s use of voice and credit its informality in various ways but emphasize that it is too low-level for those in their AP courses in terms of writing. Caitlyn, moreover, took the opportunity to express her belief about the role educators recommending or featuring *All Boys Aren’t Blue* and similar texts in their classroom.

Every time we step in front of a classroom, we are teaching values and things that we think are important. In terms of self-identity, race, sexuality, and class…We are the mouthpiece, and I would be a fan of sneaking it in somehow. Maybe not the whole thing, but at least keeping it in back pocket. To keep reinforcing and reifying this heteronormative, 1955 squeaky-clean idea of what youth are supposed
to look like is not just wrong, but harmful to our kids.

Drawing on that reference to hidden curriculum, Ashleigh referred to the first student to come out to her. Shelly related to this by referring then to her own daughter, an out lesbian in her teenage years, and the difficulty she’s had navigating with things like allowing sleepovers with other girls without alerting the other girls’ parents, school readings and policies, among other things, and how they’ll impact her daughter.

Winding down at that point, the conversation was wrapped up with final thoughts about the reading, as well as an invitation from Ashleigh for any participants to ask last-minute questions or express anything else about the readings. No additional comments were voiced. I used this as inspiration to ask if there were any lingering concerns about the study. None of the participants expressed any concerns. Regardless, I reiterated that participants would be given an alias in the write up for the study and invited them to ask any questions or voice concerns in private through email should they occur to them later. At the close of the conversation, I provided them with encouragement to continue reading other LGBTQ YA titles and to look into research on teacher education and its intersection with LGBTQ YAL. I then thanked the participants for their participation in the study and closed with an exit ticket, “If you had to sum up your teaching style in one word, what would it be?” Participants offered a range of words and explanations for those words that attested to their ability to look inward as much as outward.

Their words and descriptions are condensed below.

Ashleigh: Structured. On-point.
Carol: Pragmatic. “I do whatever works.”
Caitlyn: Open. Pretty flexible to adjustments.
Erin: Entertaining. I try to be entertaining.
Kristen: Thoughtful. I restructured AP classes to be more updated with the times.
Book Club Meeting 2’s conclusion was met with some reluctance as participants seemed to truly enjoy the discussion in the same fashion that they had Book Club Meeting 1. At its close, members expressed gratitude and thanks for the opportunity to meet with like-minded educators and to read new, unheard of works of LGBTQ YAL. Six of the participants likewise left the Zoom meeting space only to email me and again to express their gratitude and wish me luck with the book club study. Like them, I took several things away from the study that extended beyond just factual data/results and what the data indicated about their readiness and the efficacy of book clubs as professional development. In the interim between interacting with Erin, Kristen, Shelly, and Ashleigh again in private interviews, I turned toward a review of the takeaways from this discussion.

The slow-to-start conversation of All Boys Aren’t Blue differed greatly than that of Gracefully Grayson and Not Your Sidekick. It was very apparent that, at the start of the meeting, as did the takeaways from it.

Key in what I found was that participants were initially hesitant to speak out or be the first to venture into a dialogue on the book. This necessitated having Ashleigh be more assertive in her ability to get the conversation started than simply asking, “What did you think?” Once the conversation had started, it was ironically less succinct and/or orderly than that of the other conversation; the back-and-forth structure of the conversation can be argued as mirroring that of the structure of the book, with participants returning to several previously-explored aspects of the reading.

A second takeaway was the nature of participants’ body language in this meeting. I unintentionally ended up being more of a distant observer than participant observer in this discussion because of the body language and facial cues that participants demonstrated. In
particular, even the most vocal and eloquent of participants, i.e. Caitlyn and Mel, would often hesitate as they strove to find the right words to continue—something that occurred much less often in Book Club Meeting 1. A majority of these hesitations came when discussion turned toward the sexual descriptiveness in select scenes and in relation to their using it in the classroom or library setting, in Caitlyn’s case.

The third takeaway was that, despite participants’ hesitation over select content in the text, Carol, Erin, Kristen, Mel, and Shelly offered various impassioned responses about why the book is an important one for both Black, Queer youth and all students. These comments often coincided with participants leaning inward to their camera devices or speaking more loudly than in other moments of the conversation. This brought to mind someone who was seeking to engage the other members and make certain their words were heard and taken to heart by the others.

The mix of hesitancy and insistence, as well as how it coincided or was refuted by participants’ facial expressions and body language, lastly, led to the conclusion that it was difficult to navigate the issues present in *All Boys Aren’t Blue* for the participants present in Book Club Meeting 2.

Following a review of these results in comparison with those of Book Club Meeting 1, I turned toward a review of the results from the one-on-one interviews. After reviewing them in the same manner as Book Club Meetings 1 and 2, I assess what, if anything, changed with regard to how the four interviewees, Ashleigh, Erin, Kristen, and Shelly, spoke about LGBTQ issues or the respective readings. The results of the four interviews are condensed below.

**Private Interviews**

I conducted four one-on-one interviews in the eight weeks following Book Club Meeting 2. Erin was interviewed on September 1st, Kristen on September 13th, Ashleigh on October 2nd,
and Shelly on October 12th. These interviews respectively ran from thirty to sixty-five minutes depending on the participants’ availability. These semi-structured interviews took place following an email I extended to all participants inviting them to do a follow-up interview with me. Only three participants and Ashleigh expressed interest and/or availability to do an interview. Ashleigh’s interview differs somewhat as it focused on her role as the facilitator in addition to the topics I discussed with the other participants I interviews; these topics included their final thoughts about the study, their impression of the Zoom platform, and how they perceive the books we chose as classroom materials, among other topics. Select questions were scripted ahead of time but the majority were spontaneously chosen depending on where participants’ responses led me. At the outset of each interview, I described them to the interviewees as a free-flowing conversation with minimal scripted questions to respond to.

Each interview began with a greeting and recap of what’d been taking place in their lives in the weeks since Book Club Meeting 2. Talk about the status of education and participants’ work and personal lives, as well as my own, in the midst of the Coronavirus Pandemic were icebreakers in each of the respective interviews. These topics were covered before each of the participants and I began our respective conversations in earnest. For Erin, Kristen, and Shelly, I used the following scripted questions.

Interview Question A. What pros and cons stood out to you about the study?

“I liked everything about it,” Erin commented when asked. She furthermore compared the stress she presumed I was under in conducting a study and working toward a PhD to the difficulties she and the other participants have encountered in the past several months. “Nothing has ever prepared me for [Coronavirus], and my core belief is that education is an interactive experience…you can’t just watch a video and do a little something.” I expressed similar beliefs
and voiced my mixed feelings about the necessity of using Zoom for the book club study at that point.

Kristen expressed similar enjoyment of the study—adding that it was not only enjoyable, but “important” and a “wonderful idea.” She was especially appreciative of the “wonderful people” who took part in the study and the thought-provoking things they had to say. I returned with the additional question, “How effective do you feel the dialogue was in the two group discussions?” She reiterated her point about the meaningful nature of what the other members had had to say. “Some of the things they brought up were wonderful; it was nice to see so many of them unwilling to budge on their idea of quality [texts]. That’s important for us to remember as we need to hold up a certain level of quality if we’re going to contribute to diversity in the right way.”

Shelly remarked at length on her enjoyment of the chosen readings and what they lent to the conversation between participants. “I enjoyed the opportunity to talk about the books from both a [LGBTQ] representational and literary analysis point of view.” She added that it felt very impactful to weight the merits of the books and engage with fellow educators through a critical reading of the respective texts. Throughout our conversation, I took note of how her demeanor shifted from the resolute persona she had demonstrated in the group discussions to a more relaxed, open character during the interview; surprising me, she was more open to a sense of laughter and lighthearted interaction than she had seemed during the book club discussions.

Interview Question B. Do you feel that Zoom worked as a platform or would you have preferred an in-person book club?

Erin quickly replied to this question her belief that “discussion would’ve come out more organically, more naturally, through an in-person book club.” She elaborates on this by saying
that virtual platforms in general aren’t conducive to learning—thoughts she echoed in our discussion of the state of U.S. education and the current strain on teachers and students. I posed this question to her in conjunction with the question about pros and cons of the study. I held my own thoughts about Zoom back until she had responded; my goal was to avoid inserting my own perspective and/or risk coloring the nature of her thoughts before she answered. The big takeaways of this thread in our interview were her belief that Zoom was a hindrance and that items of discussion in

Kristen responded to this question on the heels of our discussion of the quality of dialogue that had permeated the group discussions. She demonstrated more appreciation for Zoom than either Erin or I did. Her appreciation for it comes from more experience with online/virtual platforms, she explained, and that it is always useful to be able to connect with people from different spaces and/or regions. She added that, “I do think overall that it’s helpful to have it recorded for your purposes,” and that “being in our individual environments probably alleviated some of the stiltedness you could expect from the Internet.”

Given the flow of the conversation with Shelly, this question was never asked of her in our interview together.

Interview Question C. Do you have any thoughts about the three books that you didn’t get to share in the group discussions?

Erin again enthused about *Gracefully Grayson* in response to this question, yet identified it as being too “young in terms of how high schoolers navigate peer relationships.” In turn, she enthused about *All Boys Aren’t Blue* and described it as “the most real.” Prompting her to explain her meeting, I noticed the way she paused to collect her thoughts. She referred back to a question on LGBTQ stereotypes from the School Climate Survey, explaining that *All Boys Aren’t Blue*
turned a lot of the “gay male” stereotypes on their head. She likewise linked it to a particular male student of hers who is perceived/presumed to be gay and how they likewise disrupt traditional gender stereotypes. “Some can embrace who they are [gender-wise] and some can’t,” she shared, referring to the student in question as being “on the fringes” within the school community.

Kristen echoed Erin’s ideas about *Gracefully Grayson*, indicating that she thought it would be her least favorite of the three readings but that it ended up being her favorite of the three texts. “It kind of threw me. I went in expecting that *All Boys Aren’t Blue* would be my ‘number one’ and that I wouldn’t like *Grayson* because it was for younger readers. It’s been a long time since I read a book for kids that young.” Following up on her remarks about her reading habits, I ask her, “Why are you more accustomed to readings for adolescent/teen readers?” She described how a majority of her reading is strictly for work purposes, i.e. finding new books for her high school students, adding “It was nice for me not to read for that purpose.”

Shelly, meanwhile, reiterated her feelings about the critical dialogue that the books inspired in terms of how it sparked explorations of both education and of literary analysis. “Representation is great,” she stressed, “but what kind of representation and how it would fit into the classroom is just as important.” Following this thread, I asked her, “What kinds of representation to you feel are missing from the classroom?” She referred to her to her initial three choices, *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, *Gracefully Grayson*, and *If You Could Be Mine*, explaining that what drew her to them respectively was how they covered different facets of both race/ethnicity and various aspects of the LGBTQ spectrum. With respect to *If You Could Be Mine*, Shelly referred to the culture of Iran and the religious factor that the synopsis suggested would play a critical role in the story. Of *Not Your Sidekick*, she laughingly referred to “how terrible it
sounded” even prior to her reading it. “But everyone seemed interested in it, so I told myself ‘I’ll go with it.’”

Interview Question D. What, if anything, did you learn over the course of the study?

Erin reaffirmed that she felt herself as being in need of additional learning with select LGBTQ topics. Specifically, she identified herself as being unable to grasp our colloquial use of the term queer. “I didn’t get ‘queer’ and am still kind of iffy about what it refers to,” she shared. I recommended that she check out the GLSEN website, dedicated to the community advancement and knowledge-building of LGBTQ educators and their straight, cisgender counterparts. In response, Erin referred to herself as “very naïve and wrong” and that she feels the “need to educate herself because things have changed” so greatly since her time as an undergraduate working toward her degree.

This question was amended for Kristen based on the direction that our interview took. Instead, I asked her, “Has this study changed any of your ideas about LGBTQ YAL and its role in the classroom?” She responded with the assertion that, “I’m pretty open to most readings” despite previously avoiding books such as Gracefully Grayson because of their being marketed toward middle school readers. In turn, she confessed that her impression of LGBTQ YAL hadn’t really changed as a result of the book club study. She maintained that YAL with LGBTQ themes is highly underrepresented in curriculum and that it is important for teenagers for a variety of reasons. This, in turn, led to a brief conversation of her training with respect to LGBTQ materials and topics. Kristen shared her lack of sufficient training on numerous fronts of diversity.

I didn’t really have any true diversity training and I could really have used it more than most people. I’m White, from a primarily White school and community, and my first year as a teacher, I only had two White kids and the rest were Black.
The original question was utilized in my interview with Shelly. In response to the question, she referred heavily to her experiences in her teacher education program. She related how the 1990s involved teachers like herself, particularly those in the Bible Belt, struggling to assign such works in their entirety or address students’ and parents’ objections to LGBTQ YAL. She then added that the dearth of such literature at that time made it even more difficult. In response, I asked her, “Do you feel better equipped to deal with such materials today?” At that question, she paused to gather her thoughts for a moment.

I feel like I would assign something it was available to me and had literary merit. I’ve never really struggled with the idea of incorporating it into a class but have never really taken that step. There’s never been a book that I wanted to teach but hesitated about.

We spent a few minutes going back and forth over a few potential readings that would meet her literary requirements and still demonstrate affirmation for LGBTQ identities, among them *Transcendent Kingdom* and *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, before concluding the interview.

These questions were asked of participants so that I might discern what aspects they found to be the most meaningful and which the least worthy of their time; the goal in such questioning was to determine how I might improve upon the study in the future were I to attempt it again. The final question was moreover an attempt to learn how the respective interviewees grew with respect to their knowledge, skill, or comfort level (overall readiness). The participants express enjoying themselves yet indicate that they would like to have had a substantially longer study to take part in.

Exceptions include Erin’s ability to recognize her own shortcomings, but that may be a realization she had prior to ever taking part in the study. Kristen, in contrast, seems to have been made slightly more receptive to readings traditionally outside those of her students’ age.
group/range; however, this seems to pertain more to her own leisure reading rather than the possibility of actually putting it into the hands of her high school students.

Their tones, enthusiasm, and body language reaffirm their commitment to the introduction of LGBTQ topics and materials, as well as that of other facets of diversity, into their classroom spaces. However, their hesitant tones when discussion veered toward the direct introduction of such materials into curriculum mirrors what emerged in the two book club discussions; for all of their commitment to LGBTQ affirmation, each is still learning and growing with respect to handling pushback from administrators, parents, and other parties. Each participant interviewed demonstrated a sense of humility and recognition of the bind they believe themselves to be in with respect to the direct introduction of LGBTQ materials.

**Interview with the Facilitator**

Meeting through Zoom on October 1, 2020, Ashleigh was given a slightly modified set of questions due to her role as the facilitator. This semi-structured interview mirrored those of the other interviews and focused on such topics as the success and failures of the study, the readings, and her hopes for teacher education with respect to LGBTQ YAL and topics, overall. Additional topics of note included her role as the facilitator and the premise of the study. Scripted questions asked included the following.

Facilitator Interview Question A. Would you describe the study as successful?

Ashleigh enthusiastically identified the study as “very successful,” explaining that she had often reflected on the “high-quality dialogue” featured in Book Club Meetings 1 and 2 in the weeks since they’d taken place. She further explained her belief that the readings had given her and the other members a lot to think about from an educator’s standpoint, adding her intention to
begin reading even more LGBTQ books. “It has really made me,” she elaborated, “more aware of the books that I chose and that I read.”

She was doubly enthusiastic about the role of community in the book club, evident from how she enthused about the people who ultimately participated in the study. “I loved knowing that these were liberally-minded people going through the same struggles that I did.”

Her one caveat was that she wished we’d been able to expand on the timeline for the study and read “a strand from each aspect of the LGBTQ spectrum.”

Facilitator Interview Question B. What did you enjoy or not enjoy about your role as the leader/facilitator?

Ashleigh was quick to say, “I don’t consider myself as [the] leader” and explained that she perceived herself as more of a “helper” throughout the study’s discussions. “If I noticed conversation lagging, I chattered until it picked up again. I do the same as a classroom teacher because I know that is what people often need and want.” She referred specifically to the lags in conversation that permeated the Not Your Sidekick discussion, adding that the poor reader response for the book necessitated more frequent interventions on her part to “break up the silence.” At the same time, she confessed her reluctance to dominate the conversations or be a fully-fledged moderator.

I didn’t want to suck the joy out of the conversation and be a know-it-all. I wanted them to show their knowledge, not only for this study but as a point of confidence for themselves.

At that point in the conversation, I posed an unscripted question to her, “Do you recommend doing more research on the books beforehand in future studies?” I referred in particular to our reading each book ahead of time in order to provide members with a more thorough representation of what to expect without giving spoilers. She resisted the idea of reading it ahead
of time yet did approve of the idea of doing more thorough research on the potential readings. “I did always try to do a little bit of research beforehand. I did research on George [Johnson] to see who he was.”

Next, she identified how she believed the role of the facilitator to be the person or “helper” who makes sure that I, as the researcher, got what I needed from participants and the study, overall. “I tried to provide a welcoming book club environment,” she added, “and to provide a sense of levity.” When asked if she herself felt a sense of levity in the study, and book club meetings specifically, she replied with a definitive “yes.” However, she backtracked somewhat and indicated her frustration with the IRB procedure in this study and that her real enjoyment only came once the organization for the study had given way to the discussions themselves.

Facilitator Interview Question C. What advice would have for someone designing similar book club studies in the future?

Ashleigh hesitated at this question and took a moment to gather her thoughts before responding. She began by discussing my hope that the study would’ve been possible to conduct in-person rather than virtually, adding that she “knew [I] wanted to do more books” than was possible given how I framed the study as a “summer book club.” She added that it was important to “be reasonable about [one’s] book count” as “it’s going to take more time than you realize.” On the heels of this, she warmed to the topic of book choices.

Instead of giving participants multiple choices of books overall, focus on a given topic or strand of the LGBTQ spectrum and offer two or three choices for them to review within that strand. Also, having a write-in option on each strand helps. Give them a week to review the options and then make the choice as a group within a defined period.
She offered a skilled balance of enthusiasm and candor in her responses to this and other questions in the interview, as she did in the book club study as facilitator. The carefree body language yet deliberate tone of her conversation in this interview similarly demonstrated the “degree of care” she referred to three times during Book Club Meetings 1 and 2. It signifies that she is perhaps the readiest of any of the participants to lead students and educators toward an embrace of LGBTQ subjects and navigation of pushback and censorship.

Conducting these interviews and reviewing the responses communicated by Ashleigh, Erin, Kristen, and Shelly was the last precursor to the analysis of data collected from the sources. I thereafter triangulated what their responses signified about their readiness and looked comparatively at their ideas and feelings in Book Club Meetings 1 and 2. In tandem, the participants not interviewed were assessed in terms of readiness with a comparative study of their verbalized thoughts and body language demonstrated in the two book club discussions.

After the data sources had all been reviewed and sorted into the themes (Saldaña, 2016), I turned toward an examination of the themes that emerged from the respective data sources. These themes were drawn from the categorized codes and examined in conjunction with the research questions that I designed at the outset of the book club study. In the section that follows, I offer a summarized review of the emerged themes before analyzing them fully in Chapter 5.

**Themes that Emerged**

Review of the results from the questionnaires, group meetings/discussions, and interviews took approximately a month to complete. In that time, my initial goal of looking at participants’ readiness or lack of readiness grew to include a critical look at what the group demonstrated in terms of their regional backgrounds in East Baton Rouge, Terrebonne Parish,
and other sections of Central and Southeastern Louisiana. This shift came about largely because of the themes that emerged in my review of the results and has since led me to reconceive of what this study can lend to other researchers and future studies. Specifically, reviewing what participants demonstrated through the study convinced me of the importance of including how geographic location requires special considerations to factor in when contemplating how educators of a particular place/location approach LGBTQ YAL and issues. The themes, outlined below, speak to the need to look at these participants in a context of living and teaching in a conservative region, and how/if that culture compares to what is said in academic research explored in my literature review. Themes that emerged include participants’ focus on real-world issues, their connections between texts and personal experiences, reluctance to teach LGBTQ texts, and needing safe spaces in which to discuss their lack of comfort on various fronts.

Focus on Real-World Issues

Focus on real-world issues was moderate. Issues such as bullying, harassment, homelessness, drug abuse, sexual assault, self-harm, and suicide weren’t referred to by members with any depth in questionnaires, interviews, or discussions of readings. Most mention of real-world issues took place in Book Club Meetings 1 and 2 or private interviews. Of note was how these issues were initially filtered through references to fictional characters in the readings and later through mention of participants’ former students and family members. Little mention of real-world issues as systemic problems that occur outside of East Baton Rouge and more rural areas of Louisiana, some of them the hometowns of participants, was made. Ashleigh, Carol, Caitlyn, and Mel offered an insider’s perspective about how the social and political values of their communities contributed to the tension that persists around talk of LGBTQ issues and materials. These anecdotes were treated with particular care and rife with hesitation from the
participants who shared them, suggesting that there was a concern with how the comments might be received by other members.

Specific examples of real-world issues that took place in their communities include Mel and Ashleigh’s references to sexually transmitted diseases and the threat of sexual assault against LGBTQ individuals, and of homelessness and drug abuse. Mel talked briefly in Book Club Meeting 2 about the added risk that LGBTQ have of practicing unsafe sex and of contracting select diseases, i.e. HIV or AIDS, thanks to a dearth of queer-affirmative sex ed that is a staple of education in their home state. Ashleigh, in contrast, referred to a past student and the very real threat of being homeless and banished from one’s family on religious grounds because of the stigma against being gay for male-identified teens in Louisiana. Despite making these comments openly, their descriptions of real-world concerns never expressed a dislike or dissatisfaction with their state’s politics and social norms directly.

Participants’ knowledge of the social conventions, values, and politics that are dominant in Central and Southeastern Louisiana is paralleled by their skill about knowing what to say and what not to say. Likewise, the reluctance to coach their comments in strictly geographic terms or address explicitly what they found to be lacking in their communities and neighborhoods with regard to LGBTQ issues signals a lack of comfort that mirrors that of their handling of LGBTQ-specific, real-world issues as educators. being limited to literature or their immediate vicinities through personal experiences with youth in school settings. In terms of comfort, participants overall seemed unwilling to pick up discussions of bullying in group discussions with any sincerity. The real-world implications of what George and Grayson undergo, in turn, made it difficult for me to envision them being highly skilled at handling the most sensitive (but important) of real-world issues that youth who are questioning and/or identify as LGBTQ face.
Connections Between Texts and Personal Experiences

Eight of the participants used personal experiences to make sense of what they encountered in the readings and vice versa. Discussion of *All Boys Aren’t Blue* and *Gracefully Grayson*, if not all three readings, sparked numerous references to their former and current students, and to their professional training and personal lives. Examples include Ashleigh’s remarks about how a student once came out to her out-of-the-blue, how Mel has several LGBTQ relatives who deal with issues not unlike George in *All Boys*, and Shelly’s daughter, who identifies as gay, having difficulty with such things as sleepovers with female friends because of the stigma against LGBTQ individuals in their area. Participants perform the same task expected of students by using literature and personal experience to make sense of what LGBTQ face in their close proximity/environments.

These connections legitimize their knowledge of the issues that real-life individuals face without presuming to put themselves *directly* in the shoes of a LGBTQ individual. This indicates awareness of their privilege as White straight, cisgender educators in relation to LGBTQ individuals’ struggles. Their skill in making these connections is evidenced by meaningful connections and furthermore by politically correct, but informal language and tones that speak to their attempt to empathize with both real and fictional LGBTQ people. Skill is further evidenced by their attention to topical content and narrative quality in conjunction with these text-to-life connections. Comfort-wise, participants seem more inclined to focus on others than their own personal identities in relation to LGBTQ struggles and when making text-to-life connections. Little to no first-person examinations were offered with respect to their sexualities, gender identities, or race, signaling that this comfort is skewered toward looking at close relatives and students rather than themselves.
Reluctance to Teach LGBTQ Titles

Enthusiasm shown by the eight verbally-engaged participants for *Gracefully Grayson* and *All Boys Aren’t Blue* stands in stark contrast to their open admissions that they’d be unable to teach either book in their entirety. The same is true of *Not Your Sidekick* as much for its narrative failings as its portrayal of a female same-sex relationship. The hesitation by the eight participants and comments outlining their reasoning, ranging from a tightly-packed, scripted curriculum to the too-simplistic writing of *Gracefully Grayson* to the too risqué scenes of *All Boys Aren’t Blue*. The reasons given in respect to *All Boys* is perhaps the most honest reasoning given by the participants in question about why it couldn’t be incorporated into curricula in its entirety.

Their cautious admission that they could only “get away with” select scenes from either book being taught reinforce what I observed in their body language—a sense of frustration intermixed with resignation about the situation with respect to teaching LGBTQ materials directly. This deference to the specter of backlash from parents/guardians or administrators struck me as a cloak for their fear with respect to job security and what attempting to teach such materials would have on them, their families, their students, and the classroom or library environment in which they work.

Their knowledge of their school climate and what would likely happen if they attempted to teach the material indicate a high awareness of the issues in their environment (school and community-wise). This knowledge extends to what topics and narrative events students and parents/guardians would take exception. Their skill, unable to be sufficiently judged without mention of how they’d teach such texts, can’t be predicted. However, the analytical skills that the participants demonstrated in their breakdown of the texts and their text-to-life connections remove any doubt that they’re more than skilled to handle such topics. It is their comfort level
approaching the subject matter with students and other parties that may be opposed to the materials on religious or social grounds which indicates that shows they’re not yet ready to brave this field of YAL in direct ways.

**Educators Need Spaces to Build Comfort**

Participants’ recognition of the possibility of backlash from one or more parties and the apprehension that they demonstrate illustrates the stark need for a safe space in which they can confront these realities and the reasons for them. The same, in my opinion, would be true of the other members who could explore in greater depth and explicit detail the scenarios that would unfold if they incorporated one of the three readings or another LGBTQ text of their choosing into their teaching.

Doing a longer study which directly addressed the ways that backlash would occur, and the root causes of their fear would improve upon their knowledge and skill as educators. Knowing what they’re afraid of and how to dispel that fear, and the skill to handle pushback through conversations with fellow educators, could ultimately lead to their being more assertive with respect to incorporating entire works of LGBTQ YAL into their lessons.

**Conclusion**

These themes will be discussed thematically in Chapter 5, in comparison to select materials from the literature review and with respect to an overall picture of educator culture, the book club as a means of professional development, and thereafter linked to recommendations for future research and professional development on educators’ handling of LGBTQ YAL and other relevant materials and topics. In the discussion to follow, I look at the participants with a mixture
of appreciation for their commitment to education and the critical eye of a researcher who must look deeply at what is and isn’t said.
CHAPTER 5. ARE WE THERE YET? A DISCUSSION

Introduction

“It’s unfortunate that we have to be surreptitious about it.” Shelly’s comment perfectly captures a lack of readiness to use and recommend these books openly that she and the other members demonstrated in the study. Working respectively as ELA teachers, postsecondary instructors, and a librarian, the group has both the experiential knowledge and analytical skills teaching LGBTQ YAL would entail. In stark contrast is their lack of comfort handling the anticipated pushback and perceived threats to their careers that explicit incorporation of LGBTQ materials into lesson plans would pose. This is not a reflection of them or their strength as advocates but a telling reality of educator culture and training in the U.S. over the past three decades. It is likewise indicative of their knowledge about the social environment and cultural values that persist in their shared communities in East Baton Rouge, Terrebonne Parish, and other sites in Central and Southeastern Louisiana. Their shared realization about the pitfalls of being an educator in an environment wherein LGBTQ individuals are still rejected on the basis of religious values was communicated in various ways by each of the participants. Moreover, each of the participants except Bree in some way indicated knowing that they’d be unable to “get away” with teaching whole-class lessons on LGBTQ themes or a LGBTQ text in its entirety without some objections or censure from students’ parents/caregivers, administrators, or even community figures who maintain LGBTQ are immortal and unwelcome in school sites and elsewhere in the region.

Their solution is to instead resign themselves to housing LGBTQ texts on their bookshelves and only recommending them to students who may be in sharp need of them. These decisions affirm their verbalized and written comments about the importance of such readings.
and of LGBTQ and cisgender, straight students needing equal access to high-quality materials. Yet, it nevertheless indicates that there is a fear and deference at work in their professional roles. These two positions unfortunately help maintain the status quo with respect to heteronormative values and the religious freedoms of members in their communities. In turn, this leaves texts that normalize straight, cisgender characters unchallenged as the leading, if not only, type of reading their students can expect to be actively taught. It is a cyclical issue that, per the conclusions I’ve arrived at, is unlikely to end or be challenged in the near future.

What follows is a discussion of that fear and unknowing, not exclusively attributable to the region in which they work and live, and the consequences of how LGBTQ exclusion and various phobias and bigotry is rarely challenged in teacher education or addressed within professional development opportunities. This chapter begins with an overview of limitations of the book club study, noting how the Coronavirus Pandemic played havoc with both participants’ time and capacities as educators, and of the limited amount of time in which participants had to engage with readings that contain LGBTQ themes and characters. Thereafter, the chapter looks at the emergent themes referred to in the previous chapter; these themes are explored through the research questions designed at the outset of the book club study. I analyzed the findings in accordance with Creswell and Creswell’s (2018) notion of ethnography. Answers to the respective research questions serve as the way that the participants’ readiness is looked at and its relationship to what is said in other academic research on the intersection of teacher education/professional development and LGBTQ navigation. Following the section on research questions, I discuss what was offered to this field of research by the study in the New Ground section. Recommendations follow, with particular emphasis on what other research studies should contemplate when designing similar studies. At the close of Chapter 5, I summarize my
thoughts about various facets of the study and where I plan to go from here as a researcher committed to LGBTQ affirmation and inclusion.

Limitations

For me, the threat of the Coronavirus Pandemic didn’t truly sink until mid-April of 2020. This effect of the virus and what it meant for educators working full-time in schools may have begun to set in slightly earlier; the participants of the book club study spoke in small doses and bits about the unexpected changes that it posed for them as educators and with respect to the safety of their students. Examples include the growing sense of dismay and frustration that they face when it became apparent that the remainder of the Spring 2020 semester needed to be shifted onto a virtual platform with little time for them prepare. With regard to the book club study, this similar shift came nowhere near being as difficult for me as it did for them; their need to shift all of their work, i.e. lesson plans, assessments, and the like, and interact with students onto a virtual platform was something that even the veteran educators, i.e. Carol, Caitlyn, Erin, Mel, Shelly, and Teresa, confessed struggling with and finding themselves in a state of unexpected upheaval. These unexpected realities played havoc with their understanding of what was to come, as it did for me in the book club study and my own future as an educator. Thankfully, the limitations of the book club study were relatively few, i.e. needing to navigate the new platform of Zoom and discover how it would change the interactions that occurred in the book club discussions. The largest limitation to the study, in hindsight, was contending with the realization that there were new realities for both these educators and their students to contend with. I thereby sought to make the book club meetings and any/all interactions with them as enjoyable an experience as possible, as did Ashleigh in her role as the facilitator. In turn, using
the research question that follow was intended to look as much at their new realities and how these participants were able to adapt to the changes in their work without losing any of their insistence about the need for LGBTQ advocacy.

**Research Questions Answered**

Three research questions were designed at the outset of this study to afford me a guiding scope for my inquiries into how ready the participants were to use such books openly or integrate them into their curriculum. These questions were constructed in keeping with Creswell and Creswell’s (2018) notion of ethnography in how it looks at the shared culture and highlights of similarities and differences. Using ethnography was a decision inspired by Blackburn (2011), given what I learned about educators’ lack of attention to LGBTQ themes in curricula and within college-level training. These questions proved integral to how I looked at the members of the study as individuals and as a group with a shared background. Key was that ethnography allowed me to look deeply at educator culture and gave credence to almost all of what I read in my literature review. Examples include how research relates that educator culture is rife with educators who themselves enact bigotry (Bott, 2000; Knaier, 2017; Reynolds, 2017), educators who aren’t able to be open advocates for LGBTQ youth (Eckes & McCarthy, 2008; Wright & Smith, 2015). The participants in this study revealed themselves to be among the second category as they have to balance their acts as advocates against the bigotry of other educators and that of parents/guardians. The research questions that follow paint a mixed picture about this group of participants’ similar lack of comfort and the experiences they shared during the course of the study.

Research Question A. What LGBTQ topics are participants *not* ready to teach?
Over half of the book club’s members openly admitted that they’d be unable to get away with introducing *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, *Gracefully Grayson*, or others with LGBTQ themes into their curriculum. More assertive members, Carol in particular, opted to say this phrase outright whereas others indicated their inability through a series of nods. I view their decision-making and recognition of the beliefs of administrators and parents/guardians as evidence of their knowledge about their school sites. Reflecting on how their knowledge left me disheartened by their need to follow to the status quo yet cognizant of what is accomplished through their surreptitious delivery of LGBTQ materials. In turn, it led me to the knowledge that neither knowledge nor skill is as fixed or black and white as it might have seemed to me at the outset of this study.

Knowledge-wise, these educators furthermore called into question my belief about the way that they work within educator culture as it stands. That these educators, of different generations with three to twenty-five or more years of experience and other distinguishing characteristics, share reluctance to teach LGBTQ works directly shows that an undercurrent of fear persists in education. This undercurrent has been explored in research (Bott, 2000; Knaier, 2017; Reynolds, 2017) and strongly resonated with what these participants indicated in the study about their own school sites. Yet, their acknowledgment of that fear, another sign of their knowledge, did not prevent them from subtly working into their classroom or library spaces that opportunity for youth to encounter LGBTQ materials and themes. There is a skill and knowledge in that shared habit, signaling collectively that they are of a similar mind about gradually progressing LGBTQ materials into curricula until it is no longer a point of contention for students or third parties; neither will their fear of backlash or pushback from such parties deter them from stealthily making changes to the status quo.
Within academic research, teachers in particular have confessed struggling to diversify their practice due to personal and professional fears born of the homophobia and other anti-LGBTQ sentiments which they encounter in school environments (Eckes & McCarthy, 2008; Wright & Smith, 2015). Jenkins (2000) is critical of the censorship that educators encounter with respect to LGBTQ inclusion through YAL in educational spaces, with it being the among the most contested areas of any literature. Participants of Rainbow Advocates conveyed distinctly similar experiences and beliefs about their own school sites, in numerous instances referring to a lack of administrative support and their own sense of how YAL with LGBTQ themes would be received by parents/guardians should they attempt to introduce it to a whole class. Their fear is supported by a wide range of pieces on educational research that looks at teacher education programs as an additional culprit in this lack of readiness. The maintaining of anti-LGBTQ sentiment, such research notes, comes from a deference to authority and anticipated backlash and ultimately leaves educators’ practice with little room to be diversified (Blackburn, 2011; Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Giffney, 2009; Gorski et al., 2013; Magnus & Lundin, 2016; Mayo, 2014; Szalcha, 2004; Warner, 1993).

Additionally, these book club members allowed for the possibility that they’d be able to teach portions of the two favored books despite lingering concerns about the age-appropriateness of the material in terms of narrative clout or content. But these excerpts would have to be clear of any material that third parties might perceive as objectionable based on personal beliefs. Specifically, they stated that the sexual explicitness of All Boys Aren’t Blue would be unwelcome in their schools and result in various amounts of pushback from outsiders. Talk of this censorship is unambiguous and is not restricted to just this book or LGBTQ YAL, but to several books they’ve respectively attempted to teach in the past, i.e. Speak and The Kite Runner.
These realizations (or confessions) on their part reflect what Jenkins (2000) notes about the inclusion of YAL with themes some perceive as objectionable, with educators’ practice being contingent on the approval of administrators and other parties. Members of the book club study are firmly within the majority in this respect; being subject to censorship overall and having to base practice-related decisions on the good of an entire class arguably being a smokescreen for needing to cater to outside parties.

Their comments similarly offer one of the handful of contextualized looks at many individuals in Central and Southeastern Louisiana remain largely opposed to discussions of sex deemed inappropriate for youth of a certain age, and doubly so for that of same-sex relationships and their depiction in literature, on moral and/or religious grounds. Members’ comments illustrate their knowledge of their respective schools and surrounding communities yet demonstrate their fear-laced uncertainty about their handling sexually explicit material with teens with sufficient comfort. Regardless, inclusion of it in the classroom or library bookshelves indicates their readiness to confront these issues even if such themes aren’t explicitly teachable to a whole class.

Exploring that readiness through a subsequent review of verbal and written communication more fully led to the following realizations. Namely, it led to the realization that their readiness is a complicated affair that requires them to be underhanded at times with how they affirm LGBTQ themes and individuals. Their knowledge of their school climates and what would likely happen if they attempted to teach the material indicate a high awareness of the issues in their environment (school and community-wise). This knowledge extends to what topics and narrative events students and parents/guardians would take exception. Their skill, unable to be sufficiently judged without mention of how they’d teach such texts, can’t be
predicted. However, the analytical skills that the participants demonstrated in their breakdown of the texts and their text-to-life connections remove any doubt that they’re more than skilled to handle such topics. It is their comfort level approaching the subject matter with students and other parties that may be opposed to the materials on religious or social grounds which indicates they’re not yet ready to brave this field of YAL in direct ways.

Focus on real-world issues was moderately explored by the participants rather than being explicit or a recurring thread. Issues such as bullying, harassment, homelessness, drug abuse, sexual assault, self-harm, and suicide weren’t referred to by members with any depth in questionnaires, interviews, or discussions of readings. These issues were more of a fixture in Book Club Meetings 1 and 2, as well as in the private interviews. Therein, these issues were filtered through references to members’ students and fictional characters instead of explored as systemic issues that occur in real environments outside of their immediate vicinity. The preference that they showed toward contextualizing these issues in their communities and addressing in select ways how religious values pose a detriment to the inclusion of LGBTQ materials was approached with infinite care on the participants’ parts. Looking at their immediate communities further demonstrates the need for a contextualized examination of how LGBTQ issues are at play in school sites and for educators living in conservative regions.

Similarly, the need for text-to-life connections shouldn’t be underestimated despite their reluctance to wade overmuch into their own backgrounds. This habit of textual connections is useful as it mirrors what is asked of students in educators’ classrooms with respect to looking at the experiences of people locally but harmful as it doesn’t account for an exploration of people and places from around the world (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Dinkins & Englert, 2015; Rosenblatt, 1978). Being cognizant and addressing the differences in diverse regions with respect
to LGBTQ issues is a place that future conversations could and should go in studies that aim to advance educators’ knowledge of these lived realities for LGBTQ individuals. In turn, a broader examination of different geographic regions could lend toward exploration of the systemic nature of oppressions against LGBTQ individuals. The possibilities of looking at LGBTQ exclusion and forms of phobias used against them in turn contributes to the negative school climates that these educators and those quoted in research continually have to contend with (Bott, 2000; Knaier, 2017; Reynolds, 2017).

Two particular references to real-world issues include a comment from Mel and one from Ashleigh, who referred to the added risk that LGBTQ have of practicing unsafe sex thanks and contracting HIV or AIDS to a dearth of queer-affirmative sex ed and of being homeless because of the stigma that persists and which may alienate children from parents/guardians. Yet, they respectively filtered these short comments through George of All Boys Aren’t Blue and one of the own students. The exploration of these real-world issues may have been more substantial given additional time and/or questions posed by me about their encounters with such issues, bullying in particular. That they came up in small amounts organically, however, lend to the idea that participants need that context of a school or students in particular.

The knowledge that participants have of such issues subsequently struck me as being limited to literature or their immediate vicinities through personal experiences with youth in school settings. This lends to the notion of a contextualized analysis being at the forefront of educators’ practices with limited examinations of LGBTQ issues from a global perspective. In terms of comfort, participants overall seemed unwilling to pick up discussions of bullying in group discussions with any sincerity.
Research Question B. How do participants integrate their personal experiences, backgrounds, and beliefs into the discussions?

Participants in this study, overall, loved to talk about both their personal and professional experiences. In contrast to a discomfort with the idea of teaching texts directly is the members’ forthright yet casual chatter about themselves and their experiences in relationship to LGBTQ youth, topics, and materials. Among the most notable similarities is the unsurprising fact that most of their personal anecdotes arise from their making connections between the three readings. Eight of the participants used their personal experiences to make sense of what they encountered in the readings and vice versa. Discussion of Not Your Sidekick, All Boys Aren’t Blue and Gracefully Grayson sparked numerous references to their former and current students, and to their professional training and personal lives. This struck me as their attempt to legitimize their knowledge of the issues that real-life individuals in the books face without presuming to put themselves directly in the shoes of a LGBTQ individual.

The members had no reservation or hesitation when sharing anecdotes related to their teacher education programs, past professors, particular students, family stories, and others. The caveat, however, is that none of the participants named or explicitly identified any individuals beyond their relationship to that person, i.e. “my student,” “a supervisor of mine,” etc. Examples include how Shelly and Mel offer accounts of their daughter and grandmother respectively; these corresponding accounts offer moderate amounts of details about their relatives’ experiences with homophobia and other bigotry in schools and communities of Central Louisiana in present day and within the 1960s and ‘70s. The pair center their comments around their relatives’ feelings—signaling their greater concern for others before themselves. Additionally, participants’ references to past and present students who identify as LGBTQ demonstrated were heavily laced
with equal parts sympathy and empathy about the inequity such youth had experienced. The members furthermore express through their anecdotes a shared dislike of administrative figures who’ve proven to be unsupportive or intolerant of LGBTQ students, themes, and so on, in their careers.

Comments about the intersection of Blackness and Queerness were explored in the same earnest tone through personal experiences and *All Boys Aren’t Blue*; yet, the participants present demonstrated awareness of how Whiteness is privileged and recognize their own privilege in respect to the realities of some People of Color, youth included, by referring at several points to their positionality as outsiders in respect to this issue. They stand out from what is indicated in research about educators who smooth over racial/ethnic difference in relationship to queer identities, something that continues to provoke criticism from scholars (Erney & Weber, 2018; Gastic, 2012; Stewart & Kendrick, 2019).

Participants were, in contrast, earnest in their discussion of racial inequity and what they’d personally encountered in their teacher education programs and careers. Talk of the dearth of literature with LGBTQ characters of color was performed with vigor. The way that they expressed their dissatisfaction through verbal comments and body language signaled a commitment to expanding on White LGBTQ characters of the middle class in favor of greater diversity; this thread of the conversation mirrors what is called for in research by scholars who critique the erasure of LGBTQ people of color in general (Epstein, 2015; Nagel, 2003; Stewart & Kendrick, 2019).

The similarities in their experiences and beliefs with regard to race and other issues of note are striking when accounting for the different college programs, school sites, and differences in terms of age and generation between the members. Similarly, in looking outward
while simultaneously recognizing their privilege as White individuals whom identify as straight, cisgender women, eight of the study’s participants demonstrate a high degree of consciousness on their parts and awareness of their privilege as non-LGBTQ, White educators. Their skill in carefully navigating these issues and dialoguing about them in a way that mirrors what would be expected of students signaled a tact and high degree of analytical skills with respect to breakdowns of the texts’ topical content and style, format, and narrative. Comfort-wise, the eight members demonstrate more ease when speaking through/around their personal experiences without addressing their identities in relation to the characters and real-life counterparts in question. Little to no first-person examinations were offered with respect to their sexualities, gender identities, or race, signaling that this comfort is skewed toward looking at others rather than inwardly at themselves. Questioning that comfort may have yielded better results about how they’d situate themselves in the shoes of Grayson, George, or other characters who identify as LGBTQ.

Research Question C. In what ways is an educators’ book club an effective means of professional development?

This book club successfully merged reading for leisure purposes with the kind of authentic, community-based professional development that so many educators have been cited as calling for in research (Mayer White, 2016; Burbank et al., 2010; Dail et al., 2009; Flood et al., 1994; Flood & Lapp, 1994; Gardiner et al., 2013; Parker & Bach, 2009; Smith & Galbraith, 2011). However, it wasn’t without flaws. The biggest failing of the book club was that it didn’t occur over an extended period of time. Situating it as a summer book club to cater to participants’ busy schedules as educators was intended to give them more time to engage with the readings and complete the required questionnaires. It proved useful in allowing me to look at
their collective readiness and what their responses signified about educator culture in comparison to academic research on navigating LGBTQ topics. In that respect, I paid critical attention to the ways in which members of the study engaged with one another and what it lent to research that looked at professional development centered around educators’ handling of LGBTQ YAL and broader themes. With few exceptions, I wasn’t disappointed with what transpired in the book club despite recognizing that many ways I could improve upon it as both a designer and participant.

My configuration allowed members the safe space that emerged as a necessity for the participants to explore these topics and the materials without fear of censure or backlash. Overall, members’ engagement with one another in the three Zoom discussions was informal yet polite; few interruptions occurred when a participant was speaking about their reaction or thoughts about the readings. Participants primarily waited until a fellow member had finished speaking to jump in or pick up the thread of conversation; an exception is Erin, who preferred instead to raise her hand when she wished to say something. The initial exchange between Ashleigh and Mel during our discussion of *All Boys Aren’t Blue* was the most vigorous and high-energy exchange of any point in the three discussions. The community feel of the book club format stemmed largely from participants’ previous relationships and familiarity with one another, in turn lending heavily to the classroom-like engagement that participants demonstrated.

Bree’s lack of verbal interaction stood out to me the most as I observed the meetings/discussions; her insistence that she preferred instead to listen initially led me to believe that she was uncomfortable voicing her ideas about the topics. However, the visual cues and/or body language she demonstrated suggested her sense of comfort; these cues included occasional smiles, nods, and other mannerisms that aligned with those of other members. This could be read
as suggestive of comfort in the discussions and agreement on her part despite not offering clarity on what thoughts, ideas, or reactions she might’ve had about fellow participants’ comments or the books themselves. Her preference to listen led me to reconsider listening and not talking as detriment to one’s participation in a book club and instead contemplate what it afforded her as a member. Specifically, I wondered, did listening allow her and/or quieter educators the ability to better process what was discussed by the other members? In turn, it provokes thoughts about how book club participation should be conceived of as being more about voicing one’s opinion and instead taking the time to reflect in the moment on what fellow members have to say.

Keeping participants comfortable throughout the experience of the study—in both discussions and through interactions conducted via email and questionnaires—is thus a necessity of book clubs as a means of professional development. Additional accommodations for participants who prefer instead to listen like Bree did may help to improve upon the book club experience; such measures could include private interviews with members throughout the study rather than after the official book club has stopped meeting. Talking before, during, and after the study in private communications, whether through Zoom or another platform with live messaging, may have given better insight into how the book club’s format was or wasn’t an effective means. This would’ve allowed me to reconfigure certain aspects as the study progressed and better meet members’ individual needs.

During private interviews held at the conclusion of the study, Erin, Shelly, and Kristen, as well as Ashleigh, communicated their belief that the book club was not only an effective means of professional development, but an enjoyable experience. Their comments about how much they enjoyed reading the materials and engaging with the other members on these underexplored topics signals that they are in the majority, both wanting and needing such professional
development. Key in their applause for the book club format was that it introduced them to new
trends in YAL with LGBTQ themes, the similar experiences of other educators in the region, and
the current state of LGBTQ inclusion in local teacher education programs.

Given the short amount of time in which the book club took place, their responses align
with what is said of book clubs and their effectiveness as a means of professional development
for educators. Had more time been available to us, the possibilities of the book club could have
been that much more immense and long-lasting on their practice and overall readiness to handle
LGBTQ materials and themes. The knowledge and skills that they demonstrated, in contrast,
could have been more explored as could have the ways in which they use materials with LGBTQ
themes in a surreptitious fashion. Recognizing that there is far more going on than simply
interacting with youth directly on these topics should be explored in greater detail via
questionnaire or Zoom discussion to see what outcomes it engenders in their classrooms or
libraries. On the other hand, the mixed amount of comfort that participants demonstrated both at
the start and by the end of the study can’t be ignored or avoided. Navigation of the materials that
they participants feel they’d be unable to get away with approaching led me to recognize that
more discussions of real-world issues, racial intersections with queerness, and of their own
positionalities in respect to this material should be worked into either discussions or
questionnaires. Doing so would enhance the picture that emerged and serve as an
accommodation for participants like Bree who prefer to listen rather than speak in a book club
discussion, lend weight to their private thoughts about their handling of intersections, and expand
on their ability to recognize how LGBTQ topics differ from environment to environment, i.e. in
different countries. If given the option to again use Zoom as a platform for a distance-based book
club, I would do so.
New Ground

A mixed picture of whether the participants are truly ready to teach LGBTQ YAL in whole class scenarios or navigate particular themes within the field of LGBTQ studies arose from this study. Although each member demonstrated a credible skill as readers capable of deep analysis and making text-to-life connections, there remains sound doubts about the extent of their knowledge of real-world (global) awareness and particularly of comfort levels. In regard to comfort, the participants show themselves to be firmly in the majority as they struggle to meet students’ needs, contend with hostile school climates, and err on the side of caution when deferring to administrator and parent/guardian expectations simultaneously.

This study lends to the research that shows the stresses born of those competing requirements and how educators must balance them with aplomb on top of all the other tasks and responsibilities required of them. It furthermore adds to literature that emphasizes the usefulness of book clubs as professional development and how such book clubs helps to build on their capacity for introducing LGBTQ themes into conversations and activities for their students. It breaks minimal new ground by adding to the concept of what readiness entails for educators, whether veteran, new, or in-between, and how to contemplate that in respect to navigating LGBTQ topics.

My working definition of readiness remains a shifting combination of knowledge, skill, and comfort in both my role as participant-observer and within my analysis of the study; in using this definition as a grounding point, the study may influence others considering similar research to look as much at the educators themselves as it does what they have to contend with in school settings. In having participating educators contemplate at length how they would approach affirming such materials and themes and handling pushback may help to take this research in a
new direction; having enthusiastic conversations in the book club about a reading can be combined with participants’ actively looking inward as much as outward to see how they may be reaffirming or contributing outright to a heterosexist and/or anti-LGBTQ environment.

In asking participants in this study to assess themselves in the Participant Survey in terms of knowledge, skill, and comfort, it speaks to the realities that educators are as much a crux of the issue at play as external threats to their ability to fully diversify their curriculum and affirm LGBTQ youth, students included, and show themselves as advocates in the truest sense of the word. This study has the added benefit of being performed at a time in which the book club couldn’t be conducted in-person.

In conducting the book club virtually, it lent additional weight to the notion that participants can be from across the globe and, as a result, bring a widely diverse perspective of LGBTQ issues to the table, i.e. region-specific treatment of LGBTQ, laws in their home country/state, and more. Doing this virtually opens up the possibilities that professional development on this topic can extend beyond what is immediately known to the participants who become involved and make them that much more knowledgeable and comfortable engaging with fellow educators in a safe space that is simultaneously widespread in terms of geography.

**Recommendations**

Based on what emerged from the study are several recommendations that other researchers and scholars can use to improve upon similar studies in the future. Researchers just beginning to wade into the field of education and/or looking at the role that LGBTQ topics play in secondary education should consider these recommendations at length and review the same articles that I cited in the literature review to grasp the extent of this issue and its implications for
all parties involved; such measures are doubly important for those who hope to create similar studies that aim to better prepare educators. I furthermore recommend that such researchers avoid the same pitfalls that I myself fell into in this, my first full-fledged research study, to ensure full coverage and enhance participants’ experiences.

**Recommendation A**

A short-term educators’ book club focused on strengthening and enriching participants’ knowledge of and skill and comfort with LGBTQ topics should have a much narrower focus to be effective. By “narrower focus,” I refer to a particular subcategory that centers around a particular identity, intersection, or topic which each chosen reading covers in a significant way. This narrowed focus and the various ways the chosen subcategory is represented in the respective readings would hopefully provoke a much deeper analysis of that topic by participants. In turn, the amount of time spent on that topic, intersection, or identity would significantly enhance educators’ navigation of it in terms of knowledge, skill, and comfort.

Alternatively, a book club that is ongoing or long-term, i.e. a year or more, can cover a broader set of LGBTQ topics as this book club did. Covering a wider range of topics in a longer period of time would affect a more in-depth analysis of the same subtopics and build a more lasting community than that of a short-term book club. Summarily, shorter book clubs should employ a very specific focus in terms of content, i.e. Black Queer YA texts or Southern YAL with LGBTQ characters, whereas longer book clubs have the leisure to be more to include all manner of topics and issues at play in LGBTQ YAL. Using a narrow focus for short-term book clubs will help members delve much more deeply into critical dialogue of a topic and experiences that a specific member of the LGBTQ community face.

**Recommendation B**
The book selection process should be at once more thorough and open to change as the book club progresses. In addition to reviewing books on Goodreads.com and other sites, soliciting feedback from a librarian and/or specialist on LGBTQ literature should be among the early steps a researcher takes. Someone in my position should read each proposed/recommended title beforehand to ensure their quality, something I neglected to do in this study. Simultaneously, interested participants should be invited to offer a few additional recommendations for potential LGBTQ readings well in advance of the start of a book club; this would better allow the researcher to see what titles are of interest to readers, ensure all would-be participants are heard, and provide the opportunity for a prolonged discussion in the Book Selection Meeting. The researcher should allow participants to vote on each text discussed in that meeting and collectively decide on the final books to read.

**Recommendation C**

The amount of communication between the researcher and the facilitator, if different people, should be ample and occur on a regular basis; topics of discussion between the two should occur well ahead of the start of the book club that the facilitator will moderate and include sufficient planning on both parties’ ends. These two individuals should collaborate on the initial book selection list that will be submitted to interested participants in a Call to Participants handout. The respective parties should have read each of the titles they’ve selected together ahead of the start of the book club and spend considerable time discussing each work and its online reviews in one-on-one conferences with each other, as well as deciding upon which themes within the scope of LGBTQ topics they would like to highlight if participants don’t themselves bring up the issues. A series of starter questions and prompts for each book and/or discussion should likewise be drafted in collaboration, as should what to convey to participants...
about the book club prior to its official start, i.e. its purpose and timeline. Having a firm understanding of one another’s background, in addition to their goal in conducting and facilitating the study ahead of time is furthermore a key element in their working relationship that shouldn’t be underestimated.

**Recommendation D**

When working with members who are hesitant or reluctant to take part in group conversations about readings, additional accommodations should be ready. These accommodations should include the option, but not the requirement, to meet one-on-one with such members, i.e. through faceless instant messaging platforms, to better build on participants’ comfort and possibly their sense of security should they wish to make comments that may offer negative remarks about their school sites, colleagues, administrators, or other parties. Questionnaires that ask specific questions about readings of all members, and especially less communicative members, and their responses to readings can allow them to again feel a sense of security until or if they are ready to actively engage in group discussions. These materials will, in turn, be able to paint a more realized picture of what participants share on paper about a reading and what they share verbally about that same text in a group setting.

**Additional Recommendations**

Assisting book club members with navigation of key websites and other sources of knowledge that can be of use in becoming more knowledgeable, skilled, and comfortable with LGBTQ topics overall; these sources should include links to literary websites and to books that win awards. With respect to LGBTQ YAL, Rainbow Book Lists and GLSEN, among other organizations/entities should be given priority when resources are extended to participants in a book club study. Both researchers and facilitators should have a visible presence in similar
forums as that of the book club members and seek to befriend them in online/virtual spaces to allow for between communication and assistance with information and materials outside of traditional book club meetings. Participants should be given consistent recommendations, i.e. future books to consider, and referred to research and news stories relevant to educators’ navigation of LGBTQ topics in school settings.

**Conclusion**

As my first research study, Rainbow Advocates was something of a rollercoaster-like experience. Designing the book club study and securing IRB approval and making adjustments where and when necessary, often at the last minute, reaffirmed for me what I’d encountered when reading of the planning that typically went into book club studies. It expanded significantly on my already high appreciation for those researchers and their studies that not only served as the foundation for this study but gave me the confidence to see it through. It reminded me that vocal assertion in the classroom or library with respect to LGBTQ affirmation isn’t the only means by which educators can affirm or show support for youth who are questioning or identify as LGBTQ. Making strides, I learned, is often done on a basis that isn’t readily apparent to parents/guardians or administrators who might object. Although there are a great many flaws in this under the table fashion to inclusion, it is a step in the right direction toward meeting responsibilities toward students on and off this spectrum. As a researcher, getting to interact with these educators further reaffirmed my commitment to being an advocate for both youth on the LGBTQ spectrum, those who are questioning, and for educators themselves. With regard to the study itself, I was impressed by just how much enjoyment I had in the process; conducting this study was not only a rite of passage but a fun experience.
Getting the opportunity to engage with educators with whom I shared a love of YAL and dedication to the concepts of diversity and inclusion was the highlight of my summer and of the study itself. Meeting them and hearing what they had to say was similarly a welcome reminder of just how much room for growth we have as educators in the struggle to make our practice and our core beliefs about such concepts as diversity and inclusion a reality. It reminded me that I’m not alone in wanting to make LGBTQ students and their families, and all other marginalized parties in an educational site, feel both included and valued. Doing this study accomplished all of that despite the limited timeline of the book club itself and will likely remain a beacon that I turn back to again and again in the future as I continue to learn, grow, and take pains to make my own practice the best that it can be.

The educators who took part in the study expressed similar satisfaction with the book club. Various comments made in one-on-one interviews and near the end of Book Club Meeting 2 were indicative of their enjoyment and satisfaction with the study in terms of both learning and networking. Erin, Carol, and Kristen were especially vocal about what they took away from the summer book club, explaining that they felt it was not only a timely topic that they were glad to have been able to discuss openly but a joy to once again read texts that weren’t a fixed part of their curriculum and/or for leisure, to borrow Kristen’s term. Comments from Erin about the “eye-opening” nature of the study and what she was previously unaware of with regard to LGBTQ issues and identities signal that she, like the other participants, benefited from taking part despite the very short time spent in virtual proximity to one another and these issues.

I initially presumed that a move to Zoom would be a death sentence to this study. On the contrary, it proved to be a useful, if not perfect, platform from which to engage with the other educators in the midst of the Coronavirus Pandemic. Using it was a challenge at first but is now
something I look at as being part of the rite of passage and learning curve that accompanied the study. It allowed us to meet and engage across the necessity of social distancing and do so from sites that we were both familiar with and at home in. The bias I held against technology/virtual platforms was effectively called into question by participating in this study; I won’t take the possibilities that it can afford us for granted anymore, in other words.

Compiling data and seeing what emerged from the comments, body language, and more of participants expanded substantially on my appreciation for the highly stressful balancing act that they and similar educators must perform with composure. Getting to write about their beliefs, ideas, and feelings on the subject of LGBTQ YAL and its place in secondary school sites reminded me that there is always someone who can change minds or make a researcher reconceive of their ideas about a given topic. For me, it was eye-opening to see what they made of the current status of education and of educator culture in general, and how they would change it if they had the option of doing so without fear of censorship or backlash from third parties. Writing this dissertation reminded me that they are as in need of support from researchers as they are from their administrators, parents/guardians, and the students that they so tirelessly serve. We can not only do better in making teacher education programs more affirmative of LGBTQ and other marginalized people through strenuous study and activities, but of educators as they prepare to go into the field.

From here onward, I plan to continue doing battle for educators who share a vision of diversity in school sites and commitment to supporting those students and families who are marginalized on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, race/ethnicity, class, or by other means. Keeping them in mind as people themselves rather than as the mouthpieces of diverse, affirmative instruction is a key component of where I hope to see my research go. Research must
expand on its attention to educators with respect to their knowledge, skill, and comfort, all of which are needed to handle LGBTQ topics and others still considered taboo in education sites. But this doesn’t have to be situated as a battle; instead, it should be perceived as a community in which enjoyment, fun, and laughter can occur. Our book club illustrated that, even in the midst of a pandemic and discussion of serious issues that LGBTQ face, there is joy to be found. Please consider that as we work together in solidarity toward a more inclusive, LGBTQ-affirmative curricula and what it can entail for educators, students, and our societies themselves.
APPENDIX A. IRB APPROVAL

ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST

TO: Alexis Egan
   Education

FROM: Alex Cohen
   Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: June 3, 2020

RE: IRB # E12280

TITLE: Rainbow Advocates: An Examination of Pre-Service and Practicing ELA Teachers' Readiness to Navigate LGBTQ+ Young Adult Literature


Review Date: 5/12/2020

Approved ______ X ____    Disapproved ____________

Approval Date: 6/2/2020  Approval Expiration Date: 6/1/2023

Exemption Category/Paragraph: 1

Signed Consent Waived?: Yes

Re-view frequency: Three Years

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable):

By: Alex Cohen, Chairman

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –

Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU’s Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.

3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration data, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.

4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.

5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.

6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.


8. **SPECIAL NOTE:** When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.

* All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU’s Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at http://www.lsu.edu/research
APPENDIX B. CONSENT FORM

Rainbow Advocates: An Educator’s Book Club

Consent Form

Instructions: Please read/review the following information about Rainbow Advocates: An Educator’s Book Club prior to submitting any personal information and/or taking part in any virtual communication with the facilitator, principal investigators, or other participants. After you read/review the information, indicate your willingness to have your information and contributions to the study shared (under a pseudonym) in analysis of this study and/or for the purposes of future research. If so willing, please include your signature on the assigned line. Please sign/return this form no later than June 10, 2020.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to examine the possibilities of an educator book club devoted to reading LGBTQ+ young adult literature with regard to educators’ readiness to navigate the issues, themes, and experiences of LGBTQ+ youth; this study was designed in response to research that argues that pre-service and practicing teachers aren’t provided with training in teacher education programs or given professional development opportunities by their districts/administrators, respectively. Participants will read three YA titles over the courses of Summer 2020 (June-August) and dialogue about the LGBTQ+ issues contained with the text, as well as any relevant issues pertinent to the education of LGBTQ+ youth in their respective school sites and/or from a broad standpoint. These meetings will occur through Zoom and be recorded on the condition that each participants’ written consent is received by myself prior to the study. Participants will respond to a participant survey and be given an introductory interview that assess their knowledge of, skill with, and comfort level with LGBTQ+ issues from
a practitioner’s and/or personal standpoint. The participant survey and introductory interview will be conducted through email with responses kept on a secure address and thumb-drive. The consent form will be extended to participants through email with the request that they sign it (electronically or by hand) and return it through email by June 20, 2020.

Risks: The only known risk to participants is the possibility of outsider viewers seeing Zoom chats without their consent. This risk will be alleviated by having both a password and a waiting room for each Zoom meeting. This will help prevent outsider viewers from gaining access to the meetings. Participants’ identities and other identifying information will thus be kept confidential before, during, and after the study.

Benefits: The results of this study will be of use to researchers and/or other educators at the secondary level interested in learning how to navigate LGBTQ+ young adult literature.

Investigators: Alexis Egan, available at aegan2@lsu.edu or (504) 606-6740 for questions M-F 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; Dr. Jacqueline Bach, available at (225) 578-1437 or at jbach@lsu.edu.

Performance Site: Data will be collected through a combination of Zoom and Email. There is no need for a face-to-face meeting for this study.

Duration: May-August 2020 for book club meetings; September-December 2020 for individual interviews and analysis/report-writing
Number of participants: Approximately 10

Inclusion Criteria: Candidates must be an educator who meet at least one of the following requirements:

- You are a full-time teacher, librarian, or administrator in a middle or high school.
- You are a student teacher assigned to a classroom in a middle or high school for Fall 2020
- You are a preservice secondary educator currently enrolled in a postsecondary degree program specializing in an area of education or library science.
- You are an instructor, professor, or specialist who trains/prepares future teachers through/in a postsecondary education degree program.

Exclusion Criteria: Interested parties who are not educators and/or do not fulfill the above requirements will be excluded from participation.

Right to Refuse: Participation is voluntary for all parties involved; the participants may withdraw from the study at any time and request their information be excluded from the study’s report.

Privacy: This study is anonymous. Results from the study may be published, but no real names or other identifying information will be included. Participants’ identities will be protected through the use of pseudonyms in the report. Data will be kept confidential unless release is legally compelled. Participants will be assured of this privacy prior to signing the consent form and/or taking part in any book club meetings for the study.
Investigators: For additional questions about the study, interested parties or participants may contact the investigators, Alexis Egan and Dr. Jacqueline Bach, at aegan2@lsu.edu and jbach@lsu.edu respectively.

Approval: This study has been approved by the LSU IRB. For questions concerning participant rights, please contact the IRB Chair, Dr. Alex Cohen, 578-8692, or irb@lsu.edu.

Consent: By signing this form, you are consenting to participate in the study. By checking “yes” below, you are giving your consent to allow your information (under a pseudonym) to be included in findings that may be used or distributed for future research. Note: You may give consent by signing the form by hand and returning it to the investigator via a scanned copy or a picture of the form.

Subject Signature: ______________________________ Date: ________________

- Yes, I give permission ______
- No, I do not give permission ______
APPENDIX C. CALL TO PARTICIPANTS

Rainbow Advocates: An Educator’s Book Club

Call to Participants Handout

Calling all educators! Educators—teachers, librarians, or administrators working in secondary school sites, are invited to take part in a Zoom-based book club devoted to reading LGBTQ young adult literature this summer. From June to August 2020, participants will read **THREE** YA titles with LGBTQ themes and share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with fellow educators in a safe space.

Purpose of the book club: The principal researcher will examine participating educators’ readiness to navigate LGBTQ issues and materials from a professional and personal standpoint. Participants’ individual and collective growth as educators with regard to their knowledge of, skill, and comfort with LGBTQ issues will be assessed. The principal researcher will also evaluate the efficiency of a book club as a model for professional development on LGBTQ issues in classroom/school settings at the close of the study.

What participants will do:

- Reply to a brief survey on their knowledge of, skills, and comfort level with LGBTQ issues
- Respond to three Email interviews at the start, middle, and end of the study
- Participate in a Zoom meeting where participants discuss and select which three titles to read
- Read each of the YA titles by a TBD deadline (one title per month)
- Participate actively and respectfully in three Zoom book club meetings
- Have fun! Learn! Meet new people!
Readings: Participants will vote on three out of these seven titles to read. Each book will be provided to participants at no cost to them. Please review the following titles and submit your three choices in an email expressing interest in participating!

- *If You Could Be Mine* (2013) by Sara Farizan
- *All Boys Aren't Blue* (2020) by George M. Johnson
- *Not Your Sidekick* (2016) by C.B. Lee
- *Gracefully Grayson* (2014) by Ami Polonsky
- *Somebody Told Me* (2020) by Mia Siegert
- *None of the Above* (2015) by I.W. Gregorio
- *We Awaken* (2016) by Calista Lynne

When: June-August 2020

Where: Password-protected Zoom meetings

Disclaimer: Interested candidates must complete the consent form prior to participating in the study. Each Zoom meeting will require a password to ensure that privacy is protected. Participants can choose to leave the study at any time with no penalty. Written analysis and/or findings from the study will involve participants being referred to with an alias to ensure their professional and/or personal safety and right to privacy.

Interested? Contact the principal researcher, Alexis Egan, at aegan2@lsu.edu. We’d love to have you as a participant in the study! Please respond by June 1, 2020.
APPENDIX D. PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

Rainbow Advocates: An Educator’s Book Club

Participant Questionnaire

Instructions: Please respond to each of the following questions. Once completed, please email your responses to Alexis Egan at aegan2@lsu.edu by June 20, 2020. Responses may be handwritten or filled in electronically. If handwritten, please make sure your writing is legible.

Name:

1. Do you meet at least ONE of the following qualifications? Please indicate yes or no ______

- You are a full-time teacher, librarian, or administrator in a middle or high school.
- You are a student teacher assigned to a classroom in a middle or high school for Fall 2020.
- You are a preservice secondary educator currently enrolled in a postsecondary degree program specializing in an area of education or library science.
- You are an instructor, professor, or specialist who trains/prepares future teachers through/in a postsecondary education degree program.

2. Please rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 5 (novice to expert) in the following categories. If you feel you are not applicable to one or more categories, please write “N/A” in the space provided.

- Knowledge of LGBTQ young adult literature (themes, authors, titles) ______
- Knowledge of LGBTQ terminology and the spectrum of identities which “LGBTQ” refers to ______
- Knowledge of experiences and issues common within LGBTQ communities and for LGBTQ youth ______
- Knowledge of state and policies regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ materials and as it relates to LGBTQ youth in school settings, e.g. anti-bullying policies ______
- Knowledge of your school/professional setting’s policies regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ materials and as it relates to LGBTQ youth in your workplace ______
- Comfort discussing sexual orientation and gender identity with students ______
- Comfort discussing sex, gay-bashing, suicide, HIV/AIDS, or other sensitive topics with students ______
• Comfort sharing your experiences, views, and values with regard to LGBTQ topics with students ______
• Comfort sharing your experiences, views, and values with regard to LGBTQ topics with adults and/or colleagues in a professional setting/place ______
• Comfort handling parent and/or administrator objections to curriculum integration of LGBTQ materials ______
• Skill at integrating LGBTQ materials (YAL, nonfiction) into your discipline’s curriculum ______
• Skill at using educational research to inform your practice as an educator and/or administrator ______
• Skill at creating and sustaining an anti-harassment policy or bully-free zone in your classroom ______
• Skill at meeting state/national standards in your practice while advancing cultural/contextual knowledge of an issue ______

3. Briefly describe your interest in participating in the study in the space below. Please include what you hope to achieve or learn by participating.
APPENDIX E. SCHOOL CLIMATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Rainbow Advocates: An Educator’s Book Club

School Climate Questionnaire

Instructions: Please respond to each of the following questions. Once completed, please email your responses to Alexis Egan at aegan2@lsu.edu by June 20, 2020. Responses may be handwritten or filled in electronically. If handwritten, please make sure your writing is legible.

Name:

1. Briefly describe your school in terms of the following:

   • Social or political climate
   • Geographic region (rural, suburban, urban)
   • Faculty and student body in terms of size, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc.

2. Briefly list your current professional role and any past positions you’ve held as an educator (teacher, administrator, librarian, specialist, etc.). If you’ve held no past positions and/or are yet to work in a school/educational setting, please respond “N/A”. Please identify which is your current role and which are past role(s).

3. What responsibilities and/or obligations do you feel a person in your current professional role has to students/youth?

4. What experiences, if any, have you had working with LGBTQ students/youth or families? With LGBTQ materials?
5. What ideas (stereotypes, impressions, etc.) about LGBTQ people exist in your school site? In your community? If unaware of any, please indicate so.

6. If comfortable, describe yourself in relation to the LGBTQ spectrum. Are you a straight ally or do you identify as belonging on the LGBTQ spectrum?
APPENDIX F. TEACHER EDUCATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Rainbow Advocates: An Educator’s Book Club

Teacher Education Questionnaire

Instructions: Please respond to each of the following questions. Once completed, please email your responses to Alexis Egan at aegan2@lsu.edu by July 15, 2020. Responses may be handwritten or filled in electronically. If handwritten, please make sure your writing is legible.

Name:

1. List all current and past certifications you have as an educator. If you’re currently working toward certification in a particular area/role, please indicate so.

2. List each education or alt. certification program(s) that you currently are or have been enrolled in. Be sure to include the name of the school or educational site housing that program, as well.

3. Please respond to the following questions by highlighting or bolding the most appropriate answer about your experience in the teacher education or alternative certification program you earned your credentials from.

   Your professors and/or trainers integrated discussions of LGBTQ youth and what they may face in and outside of schools into coursework designed to train you in your professional role and/or discipline:

   Never       Rarely       Sometimes      Often
Your professors and/or trainers integrated LGBTQ literature (novels, short fiction, documentaries, etc.) into coursework designed to train you in your professional role and/or discipline:

Never    Rarely    Sometimes    Often

Your professors and/or trainers used affirmative language and demonstrated inclusive behavior with regard to LGBTQ individuals (children, teens, adults, and families) in and outside of the classroom/learning site:

Never    Rarely    Sometimes    Often

4. Please describe what, if anything, you wish your professors and/or trainers in your teacher education or alternative certification program(s) had done differently or more of with regard to LGBTQ topics. Please add why you wish they’d done this/these thing(s) differently.

5. Please describe what, if anything, you’re glad your professors and/or trainers in your teacher education or alt. certification program(s) did with regard to LGBTQ topics. Please add why you’re glad they did this/these thing(s).
APPENDIX G. BOOK SYNOPSIS

Synopses from Goodreads.com

Proposed LGBTQ YA Titles

Sara Farizan’s *If You Could Be Mine* (Contemporary realism, 256 pages)

Seventeen-year-old Sahar has been in love with her best friend, Nasrin, since they were six. They’ve shared stolen kisses and romantic promises. But Iran is a dangerous place for two girls in love—Sahar and Nasrin could be beaten, imprisoned, even executed if their relationship came to light. So they carry on in secret—until Nasrin’s parents announce that they’ve arranged for her marriage… (“If You Could Be Mine”, n.d.).

George M. Johnson’s *All Boys Aren’t Blue* (Memoir/manifesto, 304 pages)

In a series of personal essays, prominent journalist and LGBTQIA+ activist George M. Johnson explores his childhood, adolescence, and college years in New Jersey and Virginia. From the memories of getting his teeth kicked out by bullies at age five, to flea marketing with his loving grandmother, to his first sexual relationships, this young-adult memoir weaves together the trials and triumphs faced by Black queer boys… (“All Boys Aren’t Blue”, n.d.).

C.B. Lee’s *Not Your Sidekick* (Superhero fiction/dystopian, 283 pages)

Welcome to Andover…where superpowers are common, but internships are complicated. Just ask high school nobody, Jessica Tran. Despite her heroic lineage, Jess is resigned to a life without superpowers and is merely looking to beef-up her college applications when she
stumbles upon the perfect (paid!) internship—only it turns out to be for the town’s most heinous supervillain… (“Not Your Sidekick”, n.d.).

Ami Polonsky’s *Gracefully Grayson* (Contemporary realism, 243 pages)

    Alone at home, twelve-year-old Grayson Sender glows, immersed in beautiful thoughts and dreams. But at school, Grayson grasps at shadows, determined to fly under the radar. Because Grayson has been holding onto a secret for what seems like forever: “he” is a girl on the inside, stuck in the wrong gender’s body… (“Gracefully Grayson”, n.d.).

Mia Siegert’s *Somebody Told Me* (Mystery, 272 pages)

    After an assault, bigender seventeen-year-old Aleks/Alexis is looking for a fresh start—so they voluntarily move in with their uncle, a Catholic priest. In their new bedroom, Aleks/Alexis discovers they can overhear parishioners in the church confessional. Moved by the struggles of these “sinners,” Aleks/Alexis decides to anonymously help them, finding solace in their secret identity: a guardian angel instead of a victim. But then Aleks/Alexis overhears a confession of another priest admitting to sexually abusing a parishioner… (“Somebody Told Me”, n.d.).

I.W. Gregorio’s *None of the Above* (Contemporary realism, 328 pages)

    A groundbreaking story about a teenage girl who discovers she was born intersex...and what happens when her secret is revealed to the entire school. Incredibly compelling and sensitively told, *None of the Above* is a thought-provoking novel that explores what it means to be a boy, a girl, or something in between (“None of the Above”, n.d.).
Calista Lynne’s *We Awaken* (Fantasy, 180 pages)

Victoria Dinham doesn’t have much left to look forward to. Since her father died in a car accident, she lives only to fulfill her dream of being accepted into the Manhattan Dance Conservatory. But soon she finds another reason to look forward to dreams when she encounters an otherworldly girl named Ashlinn, who bears a message from Victoria’s comatose brother… (“We Awaken”, n.d.).
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VITA

Alexis Egan, an openly bisexual and cis-female educator, worked as a before/aftercare counselor for the YMCA of the Capital Area while earning her degree from Louisiana State University. She aims to continue her work in a community center setting and work closely with postsecondary educators on collaborative research projects. Her research interests will continue to focus on the needs of marginalized youth and educators, and on literary materials she is passionate about exploring, among them young adult literature and film.