Out of the Box: Queering Identity Development for Sexual and Gender Minority Youth in Prince Edward Island

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I set out to answer two research questions, “How do sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth in Prince Edward Island understand their gender and sexual identities during mid-adolescence?” and, “How does identifying as an SGM youth impact their day-to-day experiences in their schools, communities, and families?” I performed a qualitative case study using two research methods, interviews and journaling, to find out more about four SGM youth, Avery, Finn, Isabelle, and Mikey. This study is not retrospective. Participants in this study are youth who are presently undergoing identity formation and trying to understand their SGM identities. The participant case studies present the experiences and understandings of youth coming to understand their gender identities and sexualities. The findings reveal that identity formation and development is not a linear process, not easily fitting into the traditional milestone or stage models. In reality, the identity formation process for sexual and gender minority youth is complex, and sometimes there is no discernable end-point where identity labels are settled upon. The cases show, in part, the complexities of queer identity formation, exploration, and development during mid-adolescence. The participants’ stories show the impact that their identities have had on their family relationships, their schooling experiences, their mental health, and for some, the navigation of the healthcare system. Avery, Finn, Isabelle, and Mikey’s stories highlight various issues present in the school system, including the lack of (a) inclusive curriculum, (b) comprehensive sexual health programs, (c) supportive educators who step in and step up, and (d) gender and sexuality alliances. Their stories show that when facing a lack of quality sexuality education youth turn to the internet and social media to find information about identity formation and development. Their stories
reveal that some experience support and acceptance by their peers, friends, families, and guardians, but that they can also experience rejection and intolerance.

*Keywords: case study, adolescence, LGBTQ, identity formation, Prince Edward Island*
Acknowledgements

As someone living in Epekwitk, an island in Mi’kma’ki, and a student at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI), I would like to begin by acknowledging that the land on which I live and study is the traditional and unceded Mi’kmaq territory. I thank the Mi’kmaq for their stewardship and care of the land on which I am a visitor.

I would like to acknowledge the support and guidance I received from the professors and staff in the Faculty of Education at UPEI, with a special thank-you to my supervisor Dr. Tim Goddard for your mentorship, patience, and kindness. Thank you to the staff at the Robertson Library—you are invaluable supports for graduate students at UPEI.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my son, Kaden. I hope that my own perseverance inspires you to try things that you are scared of, and that you never give up on your dreams.

I dedicate this dissertation to Avery, Finn, Isabelle, and Mikey. Your stories motivate me to do better and to push for change. I will be forever grateful that you shared your lives with me.
Out of the Box: Queerying Identity Development for Sexual and Gender Minority Youth in Prince Edward Island

Chapter 1: Introduction

Identity formation is a process that begins in childhood and continues into adolescence and early adulthood (Grace, 2015; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2007; Wagaman, 2016). There is a notable lack of youth voices in the available literature regarding how gender identity and sexuality develops during adolescence (Schmitz & Tyler, 2018; Wagaman, 2016). To help address this gap, I completed a qualitative case study in Prince Edward Island (PEI) with four sexual and gender minority youth to discover how it is they understood their sexualities and gender identities.

This dissertation is organized in five chapters. In chapter one, I introduce the research study, situate myself in the research, and I state the research questions. In chapter two, I provide a literature review on adolescent gender and sexual identity development. In chapter three, I explain my methodology, methods, and theoretical framework, as well as the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations in my work. In chapter four, I provide case studies for four sexual and gender minority youth (Avery, Finn, Isabelle, and Mikey) in PEI. In chapter five, I present a discussion of the findings, research conclusions, limitations, reflections, recommendations, and questions for future research.

Researcher Background

I am the daughter of a Polish-Canadian father, who came to Canada from Germany fifty years ago and settled in Ontario, Canada, and the daughter of a French-Canadian mother whose family immigrated to New Brunswick many generations ago. I was born in Hamilton, Ontario, and from the age of four to late adolescence, I lived in Point de Bute,
which is near Sackville, New Brunswick. When I was not in school, I spent most of my free time biking with my friends and siblings on the dirt roads of the Tantramar Marsh.

As my research study involves gender and sexual identity development during adolescence, I took time to reflect on this period of my life. Typical of adolescence, mine was a time of identity exploration. This time was filled with questions and confusion about my sexuality. I grappled with my identity alone, mostly, but also through diary writing and conversations with close friends. I did not grow up with the internet, nor did I have access to personal electronic devices. My family did not own a desktop computer until I was in my last year of high school, and I did not own a cell phone until I was in my 20s. My ability to answer my identity questions was very limited. I had a very close-knit group of friends throughout my adolescent years. We spent time together in the quiet corners of our high school, in art club, and in band practice—the one year that my high school actually had a band. We processed our experiences by talking to one another, and by using art, writing, and music to share our feelings and realities.

I never questioned my gender identity, but during my adolescence, I realized that I identified as something other than straight. I remember a fireside conversation with my friends when I was around the age of 15. Not one of us had figured out who we were, who or what we liked, or how we identified. Not one of us claimed to be straight; our sexualities were fluid. As an adult looking back on my adolescence, I now see that we were in fact sexual and gender minority youth. Of my friends, many did find their identities over time, while others—myself included—still grapple with the slippery and mutable concepts of sexuality and gender.
Upon graduating from high school, I moved to Fredericton, New Brunswick to pursue higher education at the University of New Brunswick (UNB). At UNB, I was eager to understand research and I took part in many research projects. Throughout these experiences, I felt drawn to qualitative research as well as feminist and queer theories. Even as an undergraduate student, I knew that I wanted to pursue a career that would allow me to conduct research. At this time of my life, graduate studies were always on the horizon of my hopes.

I almost did not complete my undergraduate degree. I was nearly finished my studies when I found out I was expecting my first (and so far, my only) child. I welcomed my son Kaden into the world in 2010, and after taking a maternity leave, I was determined to complete the last three courses required for my degree. I longed for a change in scenery, pace, and surroundings. I moved to PEI in 2011 to be a visiting student at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) and I completed the remaining courses. In 2012, I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts with a major in Psychology from UNB. During my time as a visiting student at UPEI, I made several connections to faculty and staff on campus. Through these relationships I found meaningful student employment, and perhaps most importantly, I had conversations that led to applying for the Master of Education program at UPEI. In May 2015, I graduated with a Master of Education degree, and in September 2015, I began my PhD journey at UPEI in the Faculty of Education at UPEI. In April 2016, I was awarded the Joseph Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship (Doctoral).

As an adult in my 30s, I have come to see my sexual identity as queer and my gender identity as a cisgender woman. My time exploring these concepts and ideas during
adolescence assisted my adult-self in fully understanding this current position. However, as a researcher in this area, I also realize that my identity is fluid and can very well change over time (Seawyc, 2011). I believe that my experiences during adolescence—the conversations and explorations into sexuality and gender that it included—underlie my passion and curiosity for the topic of adolescent sexual and gender identity development. Like Heckert (2010), I am interested in the act of investigation, the search for understanding and production of identity, and how identity is experienced. In doing this research, I was interested in discussing identity categorizations and self-understanding of identity with SGM youth (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2007; Wagaman, 2016).

Before beginning this work, it was important to reflect on how my positionality would impact the research process. I began this dissertation research with a background in education and psychology. This provided me with an understanding of identity theories and adolescent development. I also had to consider the possible impact of being a postsecondary student while my participants were high school students; it was possible that this distance and age difference would have resulted in my portrayal as other. I am also not from PEI, and thus may be viewed as a CFA—an island colloquialism meaning someone who Comes From Away. White (2014) stated that building trust and rapport can take time because each participant has their own boundaries for sharing. With these considerations in mind, I worked hard to build trust and rapport with my participants, and I did so by sharing my own experiences as an adolescent, making the interviews more conversational, and listening more than I spoke. During interviews with my participants, I gently encouraged a willingness to share their experiences after building trust and rapport.
My personal positionality inevitably influenced my relationships with my participants. I am a cisgender woman who identifies as queer, I am White, I am more than a decade older than my participants, I am a mother, and in a fairly privileged position of being able to attend graduate school with a full scholarship. To my knowledge, these personal characteristics and identifiers did not negatively or positively impact the research relationships. However, what was obvious was a difference in positionality between myself and my participants, specifically different worldviews, perspectives, beliefs, and realities. In these situations, it was important to understand their social positions in relation to my own, to inquire and listen deeply, and for me to share my positionality with participants so that we could achieve an understanding together. I asked participants to share their realities and experiences of being SGM youth in PEI. I could not expect authentic dialogue without taking the time to share who I am and to find out who my participants are as people.

**Introducing the Research Study**

Identity formation is a process that begins in childhood and continues into adolescence and early adulthood (Grace, 2015; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2007, Wagaman, 2016). It is a journey of self-discovery and learning that an individual undertakes, marked by an exploration of roles, values, and identities, including gender and sexual identities (Steensma, Kreukels, de Vries, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2013). Identity is fluid, changing, and shifting, and must be understood in context and in relation to others (Tajfel, 1978; Wagaman, 2016). Tajfel (1978) defined the construct of social identity as relating to an individual’s group membership and the value placed on belonging to that group. Tajfel’s take on social identity is especially important for research on identity formation for
LGBTQ youth. According to Wilson and Leaper (2016), social identities are intricately tied to how a person feels about being a member of a group, how being a member impacts attitudes for those in the same group, and for those not in the group. In addition to these factors, Cameron (2004) suggested that there are supplementary dimensions to social identities, such as perceived importance of group membership, perceived connection and closeness to group, and the perceived positive and negative feelings held toward the group and its members.

Identity is a multifaceted and multidimensional concept, and it includes an individual’s gender identity, sexual identity, sexual orientation, racial identity, ethnic identity, sense of spirituality, and general sense of self. Within the scope of this dissertation research, I looked specifically at adolescents’ understandings of their gender identities and sexuality. Since gender and sexual identities intersect and overlap with all other aspects of identity, I did not separate or compartmentalize them, but rather I tried to understand them in relation to the other aspects of identity. Gender identity can be defined as “one’s self-identification, self-affirmation, and expression of gender that either fits or transgresses conventional male and female gender categories” (Grace, 2015, p. 16). Steensma, Kreukels, de Vries, and Cohen-Kettenis (2013) defined gender identity as “the extent to which a person experiences oneself to be like others of one gender” (p. 289). Sexual identity can be defined as “a concept of self that is formed within a social context and defines for individuals their relationship to other individuals, groups, and sociopolitical institutions within that context” (Miller & Ryan, 2011, p. 2). Grace (2015) defined sexual orientation as “one’s sexual feelings and affection for one or more persons that can change over time” (p. 16). Miller and Ryan (2011) defined it as a term that “includes a person’s
history of sexual behavior, how they conceptualize and summarize their attractions toward opposite and same-gender people, and how they have come to understand and label their own selves” (p. 1). The significant aspect of sexual orientation is that it includes feelings, behaviors, attractions, and labels, but it does not require all those dimensions.

In this research I focused on youth who identified as non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual. That is, adolescents who identify as sexual and gender minorities\(^1\). According to Grace (2015), adolescents who self-define with a sexual and/or gender minority identity receive minority status because “differences in sexual orientation and variations in gender identity and expression fall outside heteronormative categorizations of sex, sexuality, and gender, as well as outside the dichotomies of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual” (p. 16). Sexual and gender minority youth make up a small portion of the overall population. Depending on the study, the percentage of sexual and gender minority youth and young adults varies widely. For example, Wells (2010) reported that in a study of 1358 Canadian youth and young adults aged 13–29, 3.5% of the sample identified as LGBTQ. In another study by Williams, Connelly, Pepler, and Craig (2005), of the total sample of 1598 Canadian high school students aged 14–19, 97 youth (6%) self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning. In a large US sample of 19,385 youth aged 13–18, 75% of the sample identified as cisgender and heterosexual, and

\(^1\) While not synonyms, I use the term “sexual and gender minority” (SGM) and the acronym “LGBTQ” interchangeably within my dissertation. When referencing research studies, I always use the terminology and acronyms that the researcher uses in their own writing.

It should be noted that a person identifying as non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender may use any term or acronym they wish.
the rest of the sample (25%) identified as non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual (White, Moeller, Ivcevic, & Brackett, 2018). Thus, minority status is warranted.

It is also important to understand the developmental timelines for sexual and gender minority youth, while also keeping in mind the variations and differences in reaching milestones. Researchers at the Pew Research Center (2013) conducted an online survey of 1197 LGBT individuals (aged 18 and older) in April 2013, and found that the median age that the respondents first thought they were something other than heterosexual was age 12; the median age that respondents self-labelled as LGBT was 17; and the median age that they first told a close friend or family member was 20 (Pew Research Center, 2013). Between the groups (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender), the median age varied slightly. For example, the median age for identity disclosure by gay men was two years earlier than the median age for all others, the median age for identity disclosure for bisexuals was similar to the median age for disclosure for all others, and the median age for identity disclosure for lesbians was slightly later than the median age for all others. Although this variation in timeline for identity formation exists for LGBTQ youth, the Pew Research Center (2013) argued that the process of identifying as ‘other than heterosexual’ begins in early adolescence, and knowing ‘for sure’ occurs around mid to late adolescence.

Additional studies have looked at milestones and stages of sexual and gender identity development, and these areas will be elaborated upon in chapter two.

Despite having statistics to help researchers understand more about the processes and timelines that LGBTQ individuals experience in their path to self-awareness and self-understanding, little is known qualitatively about identity development among youth (<18) who identify as sexual and gender minorities (Schmitz & Tyler, 2018). Wagaman (2016)
argued, “Little is understood, however, about the ways in which LGBTQ emerging adults perceive their own identities and self-define the aspects of themselves that are most relevant to who they are” (p. 207). Saewyc (2011) calls for in-depth qualitative research around LGBTQ youth identity development to further understand this experience from their perspectives. Additionally, Healthy People 2020 identified the “exploration of sexual/gender identity among youth” as an issue that will require research in the coming years (Martos, Nezhad, & Meyer, 2015, p. 24).

Identity development during adolescence for sexual and gender minority youth is also impacted by how they are perceived and treated by their peers, parents, families, communities, and society at large. Previous research has shown that SGM youth can experience positive relationships, acceptance, and belongingness (Policarpo, 2017; Porta et al., 2017), while others have found that sexual and gender minority youth are more likely to be victimized, bullied, or targeted by acts of symbolic or physical violence (Allen, 2017; Ash-Houchen & Lo, 2017; D’Augelli et al., 2005; Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014; Veale et al., 2015). Considering all of this research, it is important to approach any research project on the experiences of SGM youth from a balanced perspective, and for researchers not to contribute to the deficit perspective. In sum, it is important not to flatten the experiences of sexual and gender minority youth or to cast them into two limiting categories—as risk takers or resilient heroes (Allen, 2017; Grace, 2015). Researchers must take care to present their lives as full, rich, and complex.

Thus, my purpose in conducting this qualitative case study was to contribute to this research area. The scope of my dissertation was limited to four youth (aged 16–17) in
Prince Edward Island (PEI). I focused on how these four youth in PEI understood and came to know their sexual and gender identities. My primary research question was, “How do sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth in Prince Edward Island understand their gender and sexual identities during mid-adolescence?” And, my secondary research question was, “How does identifying as an SGM youth impact their day-to-day experiences in their schools, communities, and families?”

**Prince Edward Island Landscape**

The development of sexual and gender identity is influenced by context and physical surroundings (Grace, 2015). The identity constructs of gender and sexual identity must be understood in context to properly understand a person’s experience and social reality. Thus, because this dissertation is a qualitative case study, it is important to understand more about the province in which the four youth live.

Prince Edward Island (PEI) is a geographically small and aesthetically beautiful province with a population of approximately 153,244 as of September 2018 (Prince Edward Island Statistics Bureau, 2018). There are no precise statistics about the percentage of LBGTQ+ people living in PEI due to high sampling variability in Statistics Canada data. Some information exists, but it does not present a complete picture. There are census data from 2016 on the number of persons in same-sex married and common law couples in PEI. Of the 70,320 islanders in a married or common law couple, 0.65% were in same-sex married (n = 175) or same-sex common law (n = 280) relationships (Statistics Canada, 2016). This figure does indeed compare to broader Canadian data on same-sex married and common law couples. In 2011, 0.69% of Canadian families were considered same-sex married or common law families (Statistics Canada, 2013).
In a recent report by the Youth Retention Advisory Board, nearly 800 youth were surveyed about living in Charlottetown (City of Charlottetown, 2016). The youth who participated were aged 16 to 30, and were 62.8% women, 36.8% men, and 0.4% ‘other.’\(^2\) The report was expansive and covered many topics with a very brief section on the LGBTQ community in Charlottetown. It was reported that half of respondents believed Charlottetown to be unsupportive of the LGBTQ community. Respondents said, “while the various levels of government are generally neutral towards the LGBTQ community, some people within our city are still very negative towards to these groups and often revert to stereotyping” (p. 31). Further, youth said, “Because of the continued existence of discrimination, many members of the LGBTQ community still feel alienated from local events and public places” (p. 31). Youth also noted a similar experience for minority ethnic and racial groups in Charlottetown, saying they also face stereotyping and ignorance. While the 32-page report barely focused on LGBTQ issues, what was reported is indicative of the experiences of queer youth in the province.

PEI is known internationally for the Anne of Green Gables books and franchise. If you also include the pristine beaches, national parks, fine dining experiences, and island culture, it is no surprise that tourism on PEI is significantly on the rise (Doria-Brown, 2016), with more than 1.5 million people visiting in 2017 (Lewis, 2018a). Two PEI tourism organizations, Tourism PEI and the PEI Gay Tourism Association (PEIGTA), are working hard to make PEI an LGBTQ travel hotspot. The PEIGTA website homepage states, “We invite you to visit the island and feel the warmth of our people and our vibrant culture.” In March 2017, the PEIGTA released six videos promoting the island as an ideal

\(^2\) It was not specified in the report what ‘other’ meant.
destination for LGBTQ travellers to visit. The PEIGTA marketing campaign has received mixed reviews, with some seeing it as forward-thinking (Fraser, 2017a; Rieger, 2017), while others argue that it missed the mark (Fraser, 2017b).

On the surface, some would make the argument that Prince Edward Island is indeed welcoming and accepting of LGBTQ people. In terms of the political leadership, on February 23, 2015, Islanders elected the Honorable H. Wade MacLauchlan, the first openly gay Premier of PEI and of a Canadian province. PEI is also home to numerous LGBTQ organizations such as Pride PEI (previously the Abegweit Rainbow Alliance) and PEERS Alliance, and is a part of the Wabanaki 2-Spirit Alliance, which encompasses PEI, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, part of Quebec, and Maine. The island also holds annual pride parades and pride events, and has a close-knit and supportive LGBTQ and ally community. One example of this closeness was witnessed in June 2016, when more than 1000 people came together at Trinity United Church in Charlottetown—the first affirming ministry in PEI (CBC News, 2015)—to mourn those lost in the Orlando shooting, where 49 people were killed at Pulse, a gay nightclub. This event received as much participation as larger cities in the Atlantic region, such as Halifax, NS. LGBTQ communities are also being built and fostered within PEI schools in the form of gender and sexuality alliances (GSAs), with the first school GSA established in 2014 and some schools following suit (Day, 2017). That same year, several individuals set out to plan an annual Gender and Sexuality Alliance Conference in PEI. The goal of the conference was to provide information and workshops on topics such as queer sexuality and gender to adolescents, young adults, educators, parents, and healthcare professionals who work with
LGBTQ+ youth in PEI (Day, 2017). Since its creation in 2014, it has been a successful event with dozens of participants yearly (Blackburn, 2016).

The educational landscape in PEI is another context worth describing, as schools are important sites for socializing, personal development, and learning. The only PEI-specific study to include school climate is that of Thomas Hilton (2014). In this thesis, Hilton concluded that Island schools need teachers who intervene when they witness homophobic acts, schools need anti-discrimination policies that are known to the students, and schools need Gender and Sexuality Alliances. Another important factor for LGBTQ inclusion is having gender neutral washrooms and changing rooms. While there are no school policies that say schools require GSAs, nor are there policies around washrooms and changing rooms, there are Public School Branch (PSB) policies that state that it is the responsibility of the PSB to provide students and staff with an environment that is free from prejudice and discrimination. They specify that this policy applies to students and staff of any age, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexuality orientation, ability/disability, and more. There is one private religious school on PEI that takes a different stance, however.

At Grace Christian School, located in Charlottetown, their school handbook states:

“Gender is biologically determined as male or female based on physical differences at birth or, when necessary, at the chromosomal level (Genesis 1:26-27, 5:1-2)” (Grace Christian School, 2018, p. 9). It also states, “Marriage is an exclusively heterosexual institution involving one man and one woman (Gen 2:23-24; Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:26-27). Extramarital sexual intimacy, heterosexual or homosexual, is morally wrong (1 Corinthians

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3 In 2017, the PEI PSB reported that there are approximately ‘a dozen’ gender neutral washrooms in schools (CBC News, 2017). There are no recent numbers.
6:18; Hebrews 13:4)” (p. 9). Thus, students attending Island schools may not receive the same amount of protection, safety, and freedom of expression.

Another way in which LGBTQ students can feel supported at school is by seeing themselves in the school curriculum. Currently, the PEI sexual education curriculum would receive a failing grade according to Dr. André Grace (MacMillan, 2018). Multiple organizations in PEI (e.g., PEERS Alliance, Women’s Network PEI, PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women) as well as queer students have asked for a new sexual education curriculum (Lewis, 2018b; Smith, 2018). In response, the Department of Education has released a curriculum resource that supports the grade 9 health curriculum (Government of Prince Edward Island, 2018). This resource is called The Microphone Project and it covers issues of consent, sexual assault, and makes several references to how these issues intersect with gender and sexuality, and make specific reference to LGBTQ populations. Maribeth Rogers, a PEI curriculum developer, has been tasked with updating the grade 7, 8, and 9 health curriculums on the Island. She said that the new curriculums will be inclusive of gender identity, cultural background, and will address topics of consent, gender norms, bystander effect, and sexual assault (CBC News, 2018).

There are pockets of hatred and homophobia in Prince Edward Island. For example, in 2010, the house of a married gay couple was firebombed. Luckily, the two residents and their dog escaped. It was regarded as a homophobic hate crime and it received local, regional, and national news coverage (Carlson, 2010; CBC News, 2010; The Guardian, 2010). Microaggressions also occur, such as in June 2016 when the mayor of Montague, a small town in PEI, refused to fly the rainbow flag during Pride despite an outpouring of anger and frustration at this decision (Yarr, 2016a). The trend of not raising
the pride flag was started by the mayor of Truro (NS) and then spreading to other small towns in Nova Scotia, and PEI has not been immune to these homophobic acts (Baker, 2016). Other examples are found online in public online forums regarding Gay Life in PEI. In one forum, an LGTBQ individual asked about moving to PEI and what to expect; they received responses such as ‘don’t kiss in public,’ ‘don’t go further than Miscouche,’ and ‘PEI is full of prejudiced old people.’ These responses may sound unreal, but it provides a glimpse into island mentality about LGBTQ inclusivity and acceptance. In 2017, after the City of Charlottetown painted four rainbow sidewalks downtown (Martel, 2017), a Summerside business owner posted a public homophobic message to their Facebook page, and thus began an online war of words and regional and national backlash (McKay, 2017a, 2017c). Two Summerside residents, Meaghan Roberts and Andrew Birch, took to the streets and offered to paint rainbows in driveways and walkways for free to show that Summerside was welcoming of LGBTQ people (McKay, 2017b).

All of this considered, the LGBTQ landscape and culture on PEI is complex and possibly toxic for those looking to live an authentic “out” life. In this research, I asked participants to reflect on their identity development and how it has impacted their daily lives, including what it is like to be an LGBTQ youth living in PEI. Identity development does not occur in a vacuum; it occurs in space and time, making the context in which identity development is happening very important. In the following chapter, I outline the available literature in these areas.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I provide a review of the literature on topics relevant to the current study. I begin with sections on identity theories, gender identity, and sexual identity. Following these sections, I outline common influences on sexual and gender identity development, SGM mental health and illness, and peer, friend, and family relationships. This chapter provides a background for the study.

To begin, a definition of identity would be useful, and there are many to choose from. Identity is an individual’s sense of self or self-concept, and can include identity roles and values (Schmader & Block, 2015; Schmitz & Tyler, 2018; Steensma et al., 2013). There are many models of identity, but most theorists agree that identity is a multi-dimensional construct (Cameron, 2004; Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, & Ramirez, 2017; Wilson & Leaper, 2016). Gender identity, sexual identity, and sexual orientation are parts of an individual’s overall social identity. Gender identity can be defined as a “self-identification, self-affirmation, and expression of gender” (Grace, 2015, p. 16). Sexual orientation can be defined in different ways—by self-definition, behavior, and/or attraction—depending on which aspect is focused on. Ross et al. (2014) defined sexual orientation as the category or label that a person chooses to define them, while others have provided definitions that deal with sexual inclinations, erotic feelings and attractions, or affections (Grace, 2015; Saewyc, 2011). Miller and Ryan (2011) provided a definition that combines all three aspects of sexual identity, which “includes a person’s history of sexual behavior, how they
conceptualize and summarize their attractions toward opposite and same-gender people⁴, and how they have come to understand and label their own selves” (p. 1).

**Definitions of Key Words and Terms**

In this section, I provide brief introductions to key words and terms that will be used throughout the document. This list is not comprehensive (for a more comprehensive guide to queer terminology, see Langford, 2018). The definitions I present here will assist the reader in understanding the literature. I decided to put the definitions all in one place as to not interrupt the flow of my writing in later chapters, and readers can refer to this section as needed. In some cases, I use footnotes to explain a term or provide more information.

**Identity** is defined as a self-concept that is influenced by social interactions, culture, as well as family and school socialization (Schmitz & Tyler, 2018). Identity formation is an exploratory process where an individual thinks about identity roles and values (Steensma et al., 2013). This process is not always a conscious one. **Adolescence** is a developmental period between the ages of 10 and 18. Early adolescence is approximately between 10 and 13 years of age, middle adolescence is 14 to 17, and late adolescence/emerging adulthood is 18 to 27 (Arnett, 2000; Katz-Wise et al., 2017).

**Gender identity** is multidimensional (Wilson & Leaper, 2016). Grace (2015) defined gender identity as “one’s self-identification, self-affirmation, and expression of gender that either fits or transgresses conventional male and female gender categories” (p.

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⁴ This definition assumes sexual behavior and attractions, and uses “opposite and same-gender people,” making reference to the gender binary. As such, this definition would not be a good fit for an individual who self-defines as asexual, trans, or non-binary, for example. Saewyc (2011) argued that when looking at gender and sexual identity development, in youth populations especially, including a behavior-based construct for identity is problematic because it is possible that the youth have not yet engaged in any sexual behaviors.
An individual’s gender identity can fall within or outside of the binary (man/woman, cisgender/transgender), with identities such as genderqueer, gender nonconforming, gender fluid, agender (Galupo et al., 2017), and two-spirited (Ross et al., 2014). Gender expression is defined as “the way individuals outwardly express this inward conception [of gender identity]” (Schroeder, 2014, p. 28). Generally, if a person’s gender identity fits the gender they were assigned at birth, that person would be cisgender. A person’s gender identity can also differ from the gender they were assigned at birth, like for some who identify as transgender, and possibly for those who are intersex⁵. Transgender is an umbrella term. A person can identify as binary trans (identifying as either male or female) or non-binary trans (identifying as neither male nor female). Transgender is often used as a label, and it:

- encompasses a range of gender-variant types, including post-op and pre-op male-to-female (MTF) and female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals, transvestites, casual genderqueers, alternating pangender individuals, ambi-gender androgynes, and agender individuals who strive to nullify gender expression. […] Indeed, the *trans* in Transgender refers to any and all who transform, transcend or transmute gender.

  (Stitt, 2013, p. 21) [italics added]

Austin (2016) defined transgender as “any individual whose gender identity is incongruent with assigned sex at birth” (p. 215). Some transgender individuals choose to transition, a term used by transgender people to represent the process of changing from their sex.

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⁵ “Intersex refers to people who were born with biological characteristics that do not differentiate them as clearly biologically female, nor as clearly biologically male. In many cases, intersex people are subject to medical intervention shortly after birth to facilitate a closer match between their physical presentation and a recognizably feminine or masculine gender identity” (Marinucci, 2016, p. 14).
assigned at birth to another gender identity. Austin defined transition as: “the process of changing from the gender roles and expectations associated with one’s sex assigned at birth to align one’s external appearance and behaviors more closely with gender identity” (p. 216). The process of transitioning may include, but does not require, the following changes: “changing one’s name, manner of dress and grooming, legal documents, and/or body through surgery or hormones” (p. 216).

Individuals may also self-identify as agender, or somewhere within or around this term. Those who identify as agender can see themselves as genderless, non-gendered, gender neutral, or neutrois (Galupo et al., 2017). A newer term, grey gender, has also emerged to mean someone that feels they have a gender, but they only have a weak sense of gender. They may explain it as an indifference or apathy about their gender (Hardell, 2016). Individuals who identify as agender or otherwise may be specific or non-specific about their pronouns. For example, some individuals may prefer the use of specific pronouns, they may alternate or switch between them, or be apathetic about which pronouns are used by others. Gender pronouns are a part of everyone’s gender identity and expression, and how people are perceived in the world. They include she/her, he/him, they/them, and other options such as ze/hir. The last two pairs are examples of gender pronouns that are neutral.

Sexual identity is defined as “a concept of self that is formed within a social context and defines for individuals their relationships to other individuals, groups, and sociopolitical institutions within that context” (Rust, 1993, as cited by Miller & Ryan, 2011, p. 2). Sexual orientation can be understood as an inclination, feeling, affection, behavior, attraction, and/or arousal to people of the same and/or other gender(s) and your
sexual orientation can change over time (Grace, 2015). It does not have to include all aspects mentioned above. It can include sexual identity categories such as heterosexual, heteroflexible, homosexual, homoflexible, bisexual, biaffectionate, ambisexual, asexual, fluid, omnisexual, pansexual, queer, questioning, and others (Ross et al., 2014). Queer can be used as a sexual orientation identity term, “to convey fluidity of attraction” (White et al., 2018, p. 2). Some researchers (e.g., Canadian Paediatric Society, 2008; Miller & Ryan, 2011) take a behavioral approach to the definition (e.g., sexual orientation is based on sexual behavior), and some definitions reinforce the binary, where you can be attracted to same- or opposite-sex persons, as if the categories of “men” and “women” are opposites.

Individuals can also identify as asexual: someone who experiences little or no sexual attraction. Asexuality is not: (a) a lack of libido, (b) lack of sex drive, (c) celibacy (Bianchi, 2018). Asexuality is an umbrella term, sometimes called the ace spectrum. It can include identities such as demisexual (someone who can develop weak sexual attraction after romantic attraction), grey-asexual (someone who identifies somewhere between sexual and asexual), and many other identities that are being constantly constructed and conceptualized (Galupo, Davis, Gryniewicz, & Mitchell, 2014). A closely related identity term is aromantic, which can be used by someone who experience no romantic attraction, or who rarely experiences romantic attraction (Bianchi, 2018).

If an individual has a gender and sexual identity that differs from the gender assigned at birth, or that differs from heterosexual, then that individual is a sexual and gender minority (SGM) person. Sexual minority individuals are given minority status under The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms with the passing of Bill C-16, An Act to Amend the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code (2016).
**Heteronormativity** refers to “thoughts, speech and actions that presume that there are only two genders—male and female—and that any form of sexual attraction or behavior is abnormal if it does not involve a male and female” (Sullivan, Ullman, & Gilchrist, 2017, p. 296). SGM individuals may use the acronym **LGBTQ** which is commonly associated with group membership. The LGBTQ acronym means lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer, but has expanded to include two-spirit, intersex, and questioning, and is sometimes written as LGBTQI2S+. The acronym is always changing and growing as new terms are identified.

**Identity Theories**

It is important to know the roots of identity theorizing in order to understand the development of sexual and gender identities during adolescence. Erik Erikson is often viewed as one of the founding theorists in youth identity development, with his published work on identity development during adolescence, entitled *Identity: Youth in Crisis* (Erikson, 1968). In this book, Erikson outlined eight psychosocial stages that a person experiences in their lifetime. This is a development stage model, where each stage builds upon the one that comes before it. The fifth stage, *identity versus role confusion*, occurs during adolescence (13–19 years old). According to Erikson, the most salient crisis during this development period is identity formation. During these years, adolescents’ most important relationships are with their peers and role models, and common existential questions include, “Who am I?” and “Who can I be?” (Erikson, 1968). The end of this developmental period is marked by identity resolution. While it has been critiqued that Erikson’s model does not account for the identity development that happens in other stages (i.e., outside of stage five), Erikson clarified that identity development does indeed occur in
all parts of life, but the most salient feature of stage 5 (identity versus role confusion) is identity formation (Kroger, 2004).

Ten years after the publication of Erikson’s seminal work, Henri Tajfel came onto the identity theorizing scene with his work on social identity. His independent work—and later his work alongside his graduate student John Turner—is oft-cited (e.g., Cameron, 2004; Egan & Perry, 2001; Wood & Eagly, 2015). In his 1978 book, Tajfel defines social identity as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his [sic] knowledge of his [sic] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 63). For Tajfel (1981), social identities derive from group memberships and provide people with a source of self-esteem and pride. While individuals can have multiple identities that are tied to group membership, people are also aware of which groups they are not a part. These groups would be called outgroups, and groups they are a part of are called ingroups.

The model developed by Tajfel was later built upon by James Cameron, who proposed a three-factor model of social identity (Cameron, 2004). According to Cameron, the three factors of social identity are centrality, ingroup affect, and ingroup ties. Centrality refers to how often group membership comes to mind, the “psychological primacy of a given social category” (p. 241), and how important it is to the individual to belong to that social group. Ingroup affect refers to the positive feelings an individual has when they think about belonging to a social group, and ingroup ties refers to the tie, belonging, or bond, one feels for a social group of which one is a member. Whether identity development occurs in stages, ends with resolution, or is fraught with feelings of in-group/out-group membership and centrality, identity development for youth during
adolescence is a time of upheaval, self-discovery, and self-understanding. For sexual and
gender minority youth, who are not only experiencing a time of identity exploration but
who are experiencing confusion over their gender and sexuality, this developmental period
is further complicated and complex.

Sexual Identity Development for SGM Youth

How researchers understand the development of gender identity and sexuality for
SGM youth has changed over the last few decades. In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s
researchers like Cass (1979), Troiden (1989), and Carrion and Lock (1997) proposed stage
models for coming to understand an LGBTQ+ sexual identity (see Meyer & Northridge,
2007 for a comprehensive summary and review of identity stage theories). These stage
models included broad development stages with milestones for sexual minority youth to
achieve, such as awareness and sensitization, internalization and acceptance, disclosure,
and identity integration and synthesis. Since then, these models have received limited
validation; instead, it has been concluded that individual experiences are more complex
than stage models allow (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001; Savin-Williams, 2005). In
addition, stage models do not account for transgender identities and lived experiences of
transgender people, they do not account for the changes in the notions of sex and gender,
that disclosure (coming out) is complicated, that identity labels are too rigid and restrictive
for some, and finally they do not account for the queer theory critiques that challenge that
stability of identity (Meyer & Northridge, 2007).  

6 I would also like to note that while no participants in my dissertation study identified as
Aboriginal nor as Two-Spirited, sexual identity from an Aboriginal perspective is not
linear, nor can they be understood using stage theories; two-spirit identity is
multidimensional and includes masculinity, femininity, physicality, spirituality, gender
identity, and gender roles. Some Aboriginal people who are sexual and gender minorities
I reviewed eight articles published between 1999 and 2018 that looked at sexual identity trajectories for sexual minority youth (SMY). The studies included information on first same-sex attraction, self-labeling, first same-sex sexual encounter, and first disclosure. Not all studies included all elements. In looking at when SMY reported their sexual identity ‘firsts,’ it became evident that the proposed stage models were not adequately capturing the lived experiences of identity development for SMY. When reporting their first same-sex attraction, sexual minority male participants’ answers ranged from age 7.7 to 11.8 years old (in studies that reported male and female answers separately) and from age 7.7 to 16.5 (in studies that combined male and female answers) (Alessi, Sapiro, Kahn, & Craig, 2017; D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2008; Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999; Flores, Docherty, Relf, McKinney, & Barroso, 2018; Martos et al., 2015; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). When reporting age of first self-labeling, the average age for sexual minority males was between 14.7 and 16.4, and between 15.28 and 17.6 for sexual minority females (D’Augelli, 2002; Flores et al., 2018; Martos et al., 2015; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). When reporting first same-sex sexual encounter, the average age for sexual minority males was 14.1 to 17.65, and 16.4 to 19.09 for sexual minority females (Martos et al., 2015; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Lastly, the data on disclosure was complicated, in some studies looking at first disclosure to peers, friends, or family. Studies reporting age of first disclosure to peers and close friends found that the average

may choose to identify as Two-Spirited, which is a term that reflects both the shared historical experience and understanding that is recognized among Indigenous peoples, and the non-linear representation of sexuality (Sylliboy, 2017). The term has become “an identity category that many Indigenous LGBTQ people have taken up as a way to signal both their Indigeneity and their queerness” (Wesley, 2015, p. ii). For a more comprehensive understanding of Two-Spirited identities, please see Sylliboy (2017).
age of disclosure for sexual minority males was 14 to 17.9, and 12 to 17.9 for sexual minority females (Alessi et al., 2017; Emetu & Rivera, 2018; Etcheverria, 2018; Flores et al., 2018; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Only one study looked at disclosure to parents directly, and they did not separate by sex. The average age of disclosure to parents was 18.4 for both male and female sexual minority youth (Martos et al., 2015).

As shown, the average ages in which sexual minority youth experience first same-sex attraction and contact, as well as first self-label and disclose, are highly variable. What is apparent, though, when looking at age cohort differences (e.g., Martos et al., 2015), younger sexual minority cohorts are achieving these sexual identity ‘milestones’ at earlier ages compared to their older counterparts. Thus, what researchers know about the development of sexual identity is incomplete and changing. What is known is that youth may not reach milestones in a linear fashion and that there is a great deal of variety and range when achieving sexual milestones. Finally, it is important to recall that the milestone and stage theories have been critiqued due to the lack of transgender representation, not accounting for the changing understanding of sex and gender, that disclosure is complicated, labels are too restrictive for some, and that identity is not stable (Meyer & Northridge, 2007; Savin-Williams, 2005).

**Gender Identity Development for SGM Youth**

Models around gender identity have generally followed similar patterns. Most researchers (e.g., Egan & Perry, 2001; Steensma et al., 2013; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Wilson & Leaper, 2016) have conceptualized an individual’s gender identity to be based on the gender category one belongs to and self-identifies with, the feelings and attitudes associated with that group membership, and the amount of pressure one feels to act and
behave in such a way that is consistent with the social norms attached to that gender category.

Beginning with West and Zimmerman (1987), these researchers argued that gender identity was multifaceted, self-identified, and self-categorized. They argued that gender identity was not a trait, variable, or role; instead, gender was something a person does, it is created over time, and it is influenced by their context and surroundings. This argument was supported and elaborated upon from the poststructuralist thinker, Judith Butler (1990), who argued that gender was a social construct. Underlying this postulation is the argument that gender is not an essential part of identity, arguing against gender essentialism, which states that gender is a fixed element of identity and that people of the same gender share a universal experience.

Egan and Perry (2001) argued against the notion that gender was a fixed element of identity, and suggested instead that gender identity was composed of four constructs that were capable of change and development over time:

- an individual’s (a) knowledge of membership in a gender category, (b) felt compatibility with his or her gender group (i.e., self-perceptions of gender typicality as well as feelings of contentment with one’s gender), (c) felt pressure for gender conformity, and (d) attitudes toward gender groups. (p. 451)

Other researchers have added additional dimensions. For example, Wilson and Leaper (2016) added gender typicality as a dimension of gender identity, wherein a person can feel a sense of similarity or dissimilarity to their gender category. Both Egan and Perry (2001)’s and Wilson and Leaper (2016)’s understandings of gender typicality fit well with
Steensma et al. (2013)’s definition, where gender typicality is a construct that “refers to the extent to which a person experiences oneself to be like others of one gender” (p. 289).

Gender atypicality is a relevant area to explore further. SGM youth can experience gender dysphoria, defined as the “incongruence between the expressed or experienced gender and the biological sex at birth” (Kaltiala-Heino, Bergman, Työläjärvi, & Frisén, 2018, p. 31), though gender dysphoria is more commonly known and associated with transgender people. SGM youth experiencing dysphoria can suffer from depression, anxiety, and distress about their gender, and it can sometimes lead to self-harm, suicidal ideations, or suicidal behaviors (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018). Dysphoria can also impact how youth engage in relationships, as experiencing gender dysphoria has been linked to fear or avoiding intimacy, difficulty negotiating consent, and difficulties communicating their feelings in relationships (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017). Gender dysphoria can occur and coincide with an SGM youth discovering their gender identity, and in the case of transgender youth, it can happen when realizing your gender identity is different than the sex assigned at birth (Schimmel-Bristow et al., 2018).

**Influences on Gender and Sexual Identity Development**

Gender and sexual identity development do not occur in a vacuum. Adolescents, like all people, are situated contextually and temporally. As such, identity development is influenced by social factors like peers, media, parents, school, sexual education, class, race, religion, and community. In this section, I outline the available literature in these areas. What is important to understand is that even as adolescents enter young adulthood, their identities continue to develop; however, social influences during adolescence can have a deep impact on whether individuals feel authenticated or invalidated.
Schmitz and Tyler (2018) investigated social factors that influence the identity of the LGBTQ youth population. They found that there are multiple social factors that influence one’s gender and sexual identity development: context, environment, and atmosphere; exposure to ideas; access to social support and resources; and opportunities for engagement, activism, and advocacy. Other social factors include feeling accepted and feeling a sense of belonging, perceived peer and family support, having role models, feeling as though there are others like you around, and seeing those people. There are also social factors, like feeling unsupported, discriminated against, and feeling as though you cannot be “out” to peers, friends, and family, that can negatively impact identity development and a person’s experience in the world.

Identity development for SGM youth is influenced by social factors, such as perceived social support and social exclusion, the latter leading to minority stress, stigma, discrimination, racism, violence, and more (Crenshaw, 1991; Greenwood & Gruskin, 2007; Northridge, McGrath, & Krueger, 2017; Saewyc, 2011). Additional factors, such as social status, socioeconomic status, and race can influence how individuals chose to identify (Crenshaw, 1991; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2007). Choosing how to identify and what labels to use are also processes deeply situated within socio-political contexts. Since they are socially constructed and influenced by socio-political discourses, sexual and gender labels are also influenced by social factors (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2007; Saewyc, 2011).

**Peers and Friends.** Friendships underpin the lives of LGBTQ people, and they play a role in shaping the sexual self for LGBTQ and heterosexual people alike (Policarpo, 2017). During the formative years of identity development for sexual and gender minority
youth, having strong peer relationships is related to a greater sense of community (Porta et al., 2017), resiliency (Grace, 2015; Saewyc, 2011; Wells, 2011), validation (Pollitt, Muraco, Grossman, & Russell, 2017), and acceptance (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010). It is widely accepted that LGBTQ peer groups become “families of choice” (Policarpo, 2017).

While some friendships can be supportive, peer relationships can also be toxic and harmful. LGBTQ youth can and do experience harassment and teasing in school (Allen, 2017; Ingvar Kjaran & Asgeir Johannesson, 2013), as well as peer victimization (Ash-Houchen & Lo, 2017; Mereish, Goldbach, Burgess, & DiBello, 2017) and bullying (Katz-Wise et al., 2017). Due to these experiences, some SGM youth feel unsafe at school (Veale et al., 2015). Sexual and gender minority youth can also feel pressure to conform to gender norms (Kornienko, Santos, Martin, & Granger, 2016). Negative peer relations can lead to an increase in minority stress, which has been showed to correlate positively with the misuse of alcohol and drugs among sexual minority adolescents more so than their heterosexual peers (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Mereish et al., 2017).

**Media use.** Youth are spending many hours a day in front of screens, including time spent online and watching TV. In fact, more than 70% of youth are spending more than 2 hours online and watching TV daily (Herrick, Fakhouri, Carlson, & Fulton, 2014; Mark, Boyce, & Janssen, 2006). Other estimations are even higher. In one American publication, *The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens* (Common Sense Media, 2015), tweens aged 8–12 were spending 6 hours daily on entertainment media (e.g., social networks, video games, mobile games, online reading), and teenagers aged 13–18
were spending 9 hours on entertainment media daily. These figures do not include time spent on computers at school or doing homework.

Knowing usage statistics are quite helpful when understanding how and where young people might be learning about identity, gender, and sexuality. Craig, McInroy, McCready, and Alaggia (2015) looked at the use of online and offline media by LGBTQ youth. They wanted to understand how youth use online and offline media, and how media usage impacts youth resiliency. In this study, online media included blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and offline media included television programming and movies. The researchers stated, “Media, and the LGBTQ role models it provides, may positively influence identity formation and self-perception, as well as provide a source of both comfort and pride” (p. 257). Not only does media influence identity formation, but the internet and entertainment media are sources of information about sex and sexuality (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Pascoe, 2011). Offline entertainment media, such as popular magazines, also convey information to youth about sex and sexuality (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015). In addition to being sources of sex and sexuality information, media (online and offline) and technology are used for communication and socialization.

**Sexual health education.** Literature on sexual health education (SHE) can be grouped in the following way: literature on adolescent perspectives; parental perspectives; and, teacher perspectives. In general, adolescents, parents, and teachers all agree that sexual health education should be provided in schools, beginning in middle school or earlier (i.e., elementary school), and that SHE should be a shared responsibility between teachers and parents (Byers, Sears, & Foster, 2013; Byers, Sears, Voyer, Thurlow, Cohen,
& Weaver, 2003; Cohen, Byers, Sears, & Weaver, 2004; Foster, Byers, & Sears, 2011; MacDonald, Gagnon, Mitchell, Di Meglio, Rennick, & Cox, 2011; McKay, Byers, Voyer, Humphreys, & Markham, 2014; Weaver, Byers, Sears, Cohen, & Randall, 2002). For teachers, however, the biggest barrier in teaching SHE is not their lack of SHE training or teaching experience, but the anticipated negative reactions from parents (Cohen, Byers, & Sears, 2014). It is possible that these feared reactions are unfounded. For the most part, parents are in favor of SHE and of gaining more SHE knowledge. Of the 4206 parents surveyed in one study (Weaver et al., 2002), only 1% responded that they do not want to see SHE in schools, with all other parents in favor. Half of the parents in this study indicated they would attend a SHE workshop at their school, revealing their motivation to learn more.

Adolescents can shed more light on the quality of sexual health education being taught in school and at home. Like parents, adolescents are also in favor of SHE in schools and of SHE conversations with their parents (Byers et al., 2003; Byers et al., 2013; Foster et al., 2011; MacDonald et al., 2011). However, the quality of SHE in schools is perceived to be low, with only a third of students surveyed reporting that the quality of SHE was excellent or very good. An additional quarter of students indicated that they had never received a sexual health education at school (Byers et al., 2003). In terms of quality SHE from parents, less than half of students said their parents had done well or excellent (Byers et al., 2003), and others rated their parental SHE as low in quality (Foster et al., 2011). SHE is being offered at a variety of quality levels, and students noted that their teachers and their parents did not appear to be comfortable teaching sexual topics in SHE, and that
some appeared embarrassed (e.g., red in the face, looked at the floor) (Byers et al., 2003; Byers et al., 2013; Foster et al., 2011; MacDonald et al., 2011).  

None of the surveys cited in this section have included orientation, gender identity, or sexual identity as items. In Byers’ latest work, a study investigating emerging adults’ perceptions of sexual health education in three provinces (ON, NB, NS), sexual orientation is added as an item to be measured (Byers, Hamilton, & Fisher, 2017). A Global News article (Steeves, 2017) interviewed Byers and four SGM youth from New Brunswick. The youth interviewed spoke about the K–12 sex education curriculum in NB as well as their personal educational experiences. In the accompanying video, the students said that gender identity and sexual orientation were barely covered, if at all, in their education at school. Students in this video stated that they accessed sexual education information elsewhere—primarily, on the internet. In the video, Byers said topics like sexuality and orientation got the lowest scores in terms of coverage according to participants, who were 296 undergraduate university students. The participants in Byers, Hamilton, and Fisher (2017) indicated the they primarily get their sexual health information from peers, and only a moderate amount from formal sexual health education, self-teaching, and parents.

**Impacts on youth mental health.** LGBTQ youth are more likely to experience violence, abuse, and to be targeted by acts of harassment and discrimination, all of which can have negative impacts on mental health (Ash-Houchen & Lo, 2017; Jones, Robinson, Oginni, Rahman, & Rimes, 2017; Kearns, Mitton-Kukner, & Tompkins, 2017; Saewyc, 2011; Schmitz & Tyler, 2018; Veale et al., 2015). Sexual and gender minority youth are

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7 A limitation to be noted in all articles explained here is that there was no control in the studies, where perhaps students could have rated the quality of instruction of science, math, or history to be compared to their ratings of sexual health education.
more likely than their heterosexual and cisgender peers to experience victimization, bullying, poor mental health (depression, anxiety), stress, and stigmatization, and are more likely to engage in self-harm and suicidal behavior (Burton, Marshall, Chisolm, Sucato, & Friedman, 2013; Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Wozolek, Wootton, & Demlow, 2017). Some authors (e.g., Pollitt et al., 2017; Ross et al., 2014) argued that bisexual youth have higher rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicidality, and overall poor mental health than do gay, lesbian, transgender, and questioning youth. Others found that transgender youth “are more likely to experience depression and anxiety, and to report self-harm, alcohol dependence, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts” compared to non-trans peers (Reisner, Greytak, Parsons, & Ybarra, 2015; Sitkin & Murota, 2017, p. 725). Veale and colleagues (2015) found that in the last 12 months, 50–75% of Canadian transgender youth had self-harmed. Additionally, more than a third of the transgender youth surveyed had attempted suicide at least once in the last year, and 10% had attempted suicide four or more times in the last year.

Katz-Wise and colleagues (2017) found that sexual minority men experienced more bullying than sexual minority women, but that sexual minority women experienced more anxiety during adolescence. Sylliboy (2017) found that among the 20 participants in their research study on Two-Spirited and LGBTQ Indigenous youth in Atlantic Canada, 6 participants (30%) have had suicidal ideations. A national survey conducted on transgender discrimination found that 41% of transgender identifying adult respondents had attempted suicide, a statistic that is significantly higher than the rate for the general population, which is 1.6% (Schroeder, 2014). The process of identifying “differently” for
LGBTQ and SGM youth in general can be stressful, and this period can be marked by alcohol abuse, bullying, anxiety, and depression (Katz-Wise et al., 2017).

In the literature around mental health for LGBTQ youth, sexual minority stress is an issue for concern—it results when multiple issues compound. Sexual minority stress is defined as the “unique stressors experienced by stigmatized populations” (Craig et al., 2014, p. 88) that can lead to “stressful social conditions that cause negative mental health outcomes among sexual minority populations” (Alessi et al., 2017, p. 72). Alessi and colleagues (2017) purported that LGBTQ emerging adults (18 to 25) experienced heightened vulnerability to stress in high school, and often earlier, because sexual and gender minority youth often experience harassment, victimization, bullying, and discrimination. LGBTQ youth and emerging adults also can experience sexual minority stress when attempting to conceal their identities.

**Mediating factors.** Family, friends, and adults at school (e.g., teachers, coaches) can be supportive people in LGBTQ youth’s lives (Saewyc, 2011). For example, having a strong relationship with parents can result in a decrease in depressive symptoms and an increase in self-esteem (Mehus, Watson, Eisenberg, Corliss, & Porta, 2017; Pollitt et al., 2017). Additionally, having a supportive educator at school can have similarly positive results (Kosciw et al., 2013). Other mediating factors include youth access to external supports and resources (Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Mehus, Watson, Eisenberg, Corliss, & Porta, 2017).

Access to parental support, supportive school adults, and communities are influential mediators for sexual and gender minority youth as they grow, develop, and understand their identities. These factors influence how resilient a SGM youth becomes.
over time. Stressors and youth risk taking behavior also impact resiliency. Grace (2015) argued that SGM youth will experience stressors and may engage in risky behaviors, but they should not be viewed simply as victims or wounded. Allen (2017) also argued against the practice of categorizing SGM youth as either wounded victims or resilient heroes. Their realities are much more complex, and lumping their experiences into one side or the other “flattens” their experiences. Youth have asked researchers for “more complex renderings of their lives” (Mayo, 2017, p. 535). SGM youth also have great potential to thrive and be active agents in their own lives, and this requires asset building and support. Thus, Grace (2015) argued that resiliency is not a simple concept to define, and it is not easily grasped in the context of SGM youth. Resiliency for SGM youth is complex, multi-faceted, non-linear, interactive, and dynamic. To this effect, Grace (2015) used the term growing into resilience to highlight this concept as an ongoing process, rather than a milestone to be achieved.

Summary

In this chapter, I explored key concepts and literature regarding identity development for adolescents, with a focus on sexual and gender identities. It is clear that context and environment influence gender identity and sexuality development for youth to varying degrees. Other meaningful factors that influence identity development include social supports like peers, family, and friends, social media and the internet, and the impacts on mental health and minority stress. In the following chapter, I explain the research design and the methods I used in my dissertation research to explore sexual and gender minority youth identity development.
Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

In this chapter, I explain my research design, data collection methods, data analysis and management plans, and I provide an introduction to the research participants. In this research, I conducted a qualitative case study of how four sexual and gender minority youth in Prince Edward Island (PEI) came to understand their sexual and gender. For data collection methods, I used interviews and journaling, and I used queer theory as the theoretical framework. This project received approval from the University of PEI Research Ethics Boards (REB) (file no. 6007475).

Methodology and Research Design

I used a qualitative case study methodology to understand how sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth comprehend their sexual and gender identities. In 1985, Stake stated that case studies were becoming more popular in educational research. By 2003, Stake argued that case studies were the most common research design in qualitative inquiry. Case studies in educational research can be used to deepen our understanding of contexts, communities, and individuals (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013).

According to Yin (2014), a case study methodology is an appropriate research design when three study conditions are met: (a) the researcher is asking why or how questions; (b) the researcher has little or no control of the behavior of participants; and (c) the case study focuses on contemporary (recent and/or current) topics rather than historical (i.e., past) events. In addition, Baxter and Jack (2008) argued that a qualitative case study is appropriate for a variety of research designs, including those designs by researchers who wish to develop theory. In the present study, I asked two “how” questions, I had no control
of participant behavior, and I focused on contemporary issues (i.e., identity development in LGBTQ youth).

In case study research, the researcher must review the literature on their topic of inquiry; arguments and theories presented in the literature are called propositions. Propositions guide ongoing and future research by providing foci and purpose. Additionally, propositions guide the development of research questions, data collection, analysis, and the reporting of findings (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The data collection methods in case study research can include interviews, document analysis, and observations, as well as reviewing archival records and physical artifacts (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Yin, 2003; 2014). What is important to note is that in case study research, data are analyzed as a whole rather than individually. Baxter and Jack (2008) argued that doing so “adds strength to the findings as the various strands of data are braided together to promote a greater understanding of the case” (p. 554). Baxter and Jack (2008) likened the collection of various data sources to collecting pieces of a puzzle. Each piece provides information, but only as a whole does it reveal a greater picture. The pieces of information being gathered, according to Stake (2003), must provide the researcher with an understanding of the nature and history of the case, the setting and context, and the informants (i.e., participants).

Prior to determining data collection methods for a qualitative case study, the researcher must select the boundaries of the case. Taking advice from Yin (2014), I spoke with my supervisory committee to help clarify the boundaries of the case. I also looked to Miles and Huberman (1994) who explained that a case is a “phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (p. 25). A researcher must also consider what is not the
case (Baxter & Jack, 2008). To properly understand the boundaries of the case, it is important to outline the research limitations and delimitations. Rudestam and Newton (2001) defined research limitations as “restrictions in the study over which you have no control” and delimitations as boundaries you have placed on your study over which you have control (p. 90). In this research, there are several research limitations and delimitations. The delimitations are as follows:

- Small sample: I recruited a small sample of participants.
- Geography: I recruited from one Canadian province.
- Age: I recruited participants from a specific age range, 14 to 18.
- Identity: I recruited participants who self-identified as a sexual and gender minority.

These choices regarding delimitations were made because I chose to conduct a qualitative case study, and it is important to narrow down your case boundaries.

In preparing for this study, I knew that accessing participants from a relatively small population may present as a limitation for my research. While there are no available statistics on the percentage of LGBTQ people living on Prince Edward Island, there are relatively few LGBTQ people living in Canada, around 3.0% (Statistics Canada, 2015). In one youth study by Wells (2010), 3.5% of youth aged 13 to 29 self-identified as LGBTQ+. As such, it can be assumed that the percentage of LGBTQ people and youth in PEI is also around 3 to 3.5%, a very small percentage of the PEI population, meaning participants may be difficult to recruit. Also, because I was recruiting so few participants from an already small participant pool, I could not ensure a representation of identities from the LGBTQ+ population—selection of participant identity was beyond my control.
Theoretical Framework

According to Merriam (2009), a theoretical framework is the “disciplinary orientation that you draw upon to situate your study” (p. 68). It is both a structure that supports the research and a lens through which to analyze data. Maxwell (2005), as cited by Merriam (2009), argued that the theoretical framework is the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that support and inform your research. A theoretical framework is an existing theory with a set of assumptions and limitations that help the researcher make connections between previous work and their own work. In this dissertation, I used queer theory as the lens through which to understand my data.

To further determine the fit of queer theory, it is important to understand the assumptions that underlie queer theory as a theoretical framework. In the literature, there are four assumptions that resurface repeatedly. First, the refusal of heterosexuality to be the benchmark by which all sexual formations are compared (Snorton, 2016; Wells, 2011). In other words, “Queer theory challenges the normative social ordering of identities and subjectivities along the heterosexual/homosexual binary as well as the privileging of heterosexuality as ‘natural’ and homosexuality as its deviant and abhorrent ‘other’” (Browne & Nash, 2010, p. 5). Queer theory can be used to challenge traditional understandings of gender and sexuality, and to critique the rigid binaries that exist (Meyer, 2007).

The first assumption ties in closely to the second assumption, which argues that queer studies is not a homogenous project. Guittar (2017) explained this by stating “there is no monolithic gay experience” (p. 17), thus queer research must also assume that sexual and gender minority experiences are unique and are not to be homogenized. In fact, queer
theorists see identity as “a constellation of multiple and unstable positions” (Jagose, 1996, p. 3). Following this, a third assumption of queer theory is that identities are not stable and unchanging; rather, identities are fluid, change over time, and are always in a state of becoming (Browne & Nash, 2010; Meyer & Northridge, 2007; Taylor, 2010; Wells, 2011). This assumption, also known as liminality (Abes & Kasch, 2007), “allows for fluidity in sexual identity to occur over time in response to interactions with ever-changing social structures, life events, and self-constructs” (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001, p. 17). Thus, to say that queer studies are monolithic and homogenous would disregard this third assumption of queer theory. The last assumption of queer theory states that as researchers, we must consider the multiple ways in which our identities are shaped, whether it be by gender, race, social class, or socio-historical circumstances (Browne & Nash, 2010; Crenshaw, 1991; Lambert, 2016). In fact, according to queer theory, genders and sexualities “reflect the time and place in which they exist and the individuals who enact them. The expression of gender and sexuality is unstable, changing as the individual affects society and as society affects the individual” (Abes & Kasch, 2007, p. 621).

I must also acknowledge the challenges and critiques that come with using queer theory. For example, it is argued that queer theories are too White or Euro-American-centric and fail to acknowledge other intersections of identity such as race and ethnicity (Alexander, 2018; Greensmith & Davies, 2017). Another critique is regarding the elimination of fixed categories and how this dismissal may ignore how some traditional gender and sexual identities are tied to culture and survival (Alexander, 2018). These are valid critiques of queer theory that I recognized going into this research, and was not able to change. There are also possible benefits of using queer theory in research; it can be used
as a standpoint theory to help elevate the voices of sexual and gender minority youth. I believe that the benefits of raising these voices and the possible outcomes of this research by using queer theory outweigh the critiques (Catalpa & McGuire, 2018; Mayo, 2017; Stephens, 2018). In other words, by including LGBTQ+ youth voices in this project, I am challenging heteronormativity and cisnormativity by elevating these voices. As such, while the critiques of queer theory are valid and worth considering, I believe that the inclusion of queer youth voices mitigate the challenges inherent in using queer theory.

**Research Methods**

**Participants.** I used purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) to recruit youth between the ages of 14–18 who identified as a sexual and gender minority youth in the province of PEI. For this study, I defined sexual and gender minority youth as youth who self-identity as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or another socially non-normative, marginalized gender and sexual identity. To access this fairly hidden population, I obtained permission to recruit from a local LGBTQ organization. I was able to speak to youth and share my call for participation in person and via an email listserv. Youth who were interested in taking part could either write down their phone number or email, or contact me directly by email or phone.

After presenting my call to participate, and the notice being circulated via email, 12 youth indicated that they were interested in learning more about the research study. After providing youth with more information and explaining the timelines, six youth committed to the research process. I began interviewing participants in February, 2018 and wrapped up interviews in May, 2018. During the four month process, two participants decided to withdraw from the research study, and indicated that I was able to retain any data I had
gathered. For one participant, we had only completed one interview. For the second participant, we completed one interview and they submitted a partially completed journal. In this dissertation, the data presented is from the remaining four participants who completed the entire data collection process. All six participants consented to secondary analysis of the data.

As such, participants in this study include four self-identified sexual and gender minority youth between the ages of 16–17. Participants selected their own pseudonyms, and from this point on, I will refer to participants with these chosen names: Avery, Finn, Isabelle, and Mikey. At the time of the interviews, Avery identified as a pansexual cisgender woman. Finn provided reference points rather than labels, and identified somewhere around grey gender and asexual. Isabelle identified as a bisexual cisgender woman. Mikey identified as a pansexual transmasculine person. All of the participants identified as White and were assigned female at birth. During the study, they were all attending high schools in various parts of Prince Edward Island.

**Interviews.** I conducted three interviews with each of the participants over a four month period (February–May, 2018) for a total of 12 interviews. The first interview was semi-structured (see Appendix A), and the following two interviews were conversational and built upon topics that came up in the first interview. For the first interview, I developed an interview guide based on the literature that I reviewed for chapter 2. I attempted to include questions about identity development, peers and friends, family, school, and their community. After each interview, I transcribed the audio files immediately, and recorded notes in my researcher journal. For the second and third interview, I reviewed the previous interview transcripts and my researcher journal, and
noted topics that I wanted to follow-up on with the participants. I spent a considerable amount of time mentally preparing for the second and third interview so that they were more conversational in nature, and so that I did not have to rely on an interview guide. On average, interviews with participants lasted between 60–75 minutes. Interviews were held in public spaces like coffee shops, libraries, and schools. The interview locations were always chosen by the participant. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, and were transcribed verbatim.

I transcribed each interview, and provided the resulting text document to participants to review, edit, and comment on. I asked participants to use a yellow highlighter to indicate parts of the interview they would like me to omit from analysis, and when editing or adding text to the document, to use a color other than black so that I could see what changes were made. Participants were given three weeks to review each transcript. When participants sent the file back, I reviewed their highlights, additions, and comments, and used the reviewed texts for analysis. For most participants, I would receive a file that contained a few highlighted sentences, a few written in comments (almost always to elaborate or explain further), and a few edits (typos, clarification). After reviewing the transcribed files, one participant replied that there were no changes or edits required, and the files were fine as is.

**Journaling as a method.** In addition to taking part in interviews, each participant kept a journal for two weeks, committing to journal once daily for 14 days. Journaling is not a common data collection method, and as such, I would like to explain how it is used. Journaling as a data collection method can be defined as follows: “a journal is a diary and a log in that it blends personal reflections, accounts of events and descriptions of
experiences” (Hayman, Wilkes, & Jackson, 2012, p. 28). Journaling falls under the umbrella category of personal document research, which includes the analysis of personal documents such as diaries, journals, and letters (Hayman et al., 2012). Journaling has been used in both qualitative and quantitative research studies (Travers, 2011).

The way in which the journal method has been used has varied depending on the participant population. Journaling has been used by various researchers with the aim of having participants write daily to process information, thoughts, and feelings (Dillon, 2010; Jacelon & Imperio, 2005; Travers, 2011). For example, Jacelon and Imperio (2005) studied older adults (75 and above) and provided three options for entries: written, audiotaped, and by telephone. Dillon (2010) used email journaling for gifted youth (aged 10–14), where participants emailed an entry to the researcher on a daily basis, and they received a response from the researcher after each entry.

Journaling can also be used by a researcher to document the research process (Hayman et al., 2012). During my time as a PhD student and researcher, I kept a research journal to be better aware of my experiences, feelings, and thoughts about the research process. It was important to work through my role in the research through writing in a journal, and by taking the time to reflect on the research process. I often had to travel outside of Charlottetown for interviews. During the data collection phase, I also used my audio recording device to debrief after interviews—this method was particularly useful as I was driving. I would listen to the entries later, and take notes in my research journal.

In the present study, the purpose of journaling was for participants to document and reflect on their experiences and understandings (See Appendix F for the journaling guide). The journaling began after the first interview, where I provided participants with a journal,
and journaling finished before the second interview. They brought the completed journal to our second interview. The length of the journals varied between 9–14 entries, and entry lengths varied depending on the participant; some participants were more verbose and descriptive, and others were not. After the fact, all participants shared that the journaling was a positive experience and did not take too much of their time.

**Working with the Data**

All research documents, including signed consent forms, audio files, transcripts, and participant journals are stored on a password protected USB in a locked cabinet in my home. All data is stored on a second password protected USB in case of technical malfunctioning. Audio data, consent forms, transcripts, and journals will be retained for a period of five years and then destroyed. Data will be used for secondary analysis, as was made explicit in the research ethics applications and consent forms. All participants consented to their data being used for secondary analysis.

To analyze the data and write case studies for each participant, I went about data analysis methodically. When writing a case study for a participant, I reviewed their interviews and journal entries as a whole. I also reviewed my researcher journal and revisited the entries I had written after conducting interviews with each participant. My researcher journal was a helpful tool when preparing for data analysis, as my thoughts were recorded immediately after participant interviews, so my reflections were fresh. I reviewed participant data multiple times, each time trying to see the whole picture, and to answer my research questions. For example, I printed each transcript and in a binder, and had a tab for each participant. In their tab, I placed their interview transcripts and journal entries. To familiarize myself with the data, I read and re-read these paper copies thoroughly and used
sticky notes and highlighters to make note of quotes that stood out. After doing this, I set up a table in Microsoft Word for each participant. I once again read the interview transcripts and the journals, and in the Word file, I noted: (a) their individual characteristics and personality traits; (b) their understanding of identity; (c) where they learned about identity and when this occurred developmentally; (d) how they described their school experiences; (e) their relationships with peers, friends, and family; (f) when and how they spoke about their mental health; and, (g) when/if they spoke about topics such as healthcare, religion, politics, and society. In this table, I would also include direct quotes by participants that spoke to each item.

Up until this point, I had been reviewing their stories in textual formats (on paper or on a screen) for several weeks. I decided to map out salient parts of their identity explorations in a different way. Once I had finished reviewing all of a single participant’s data and taking note of the abovementioned information, I used paper, pen, pencil, highlighters, and markers to map out their identity formation trajectories. I noted around what age it started, what and who influenced the process, and what were key experiences. These visual maps helped me to see the participants’ stories differently. I saw their experiences in 3D and in color, rather than flattened on my screen in a table in Word. It was very helpful to physically take what I had been reading and turn it into a colorful map. In my office, I taped these maps on my desk walls so that I would see them as I wrote.

Using these maps and the detailed table in Word, I began to write the individual cases. I worked on one case at a time so that I could focus and write their experiences clearly. It is difficult to capture the case writing process. I spent a lot of time looking at the map before me, reviewing the table in Word, re-reading the transcripts when I needed
more context, and reading the participant journals to have an idea of their unique authorial ‘voice.’ When writing the cases, I tried to ensure their voices were at the forefront. When I had a complete draft of a case study written, I would re-read it, and then revisit my table with notes, making sure I did not forget to include any significant information. I had my supervisor review my case studies, and he noted various areas in the text where I was editorializing, and noted areas that needed greater explanation. I then revisited the case studies and made these changes. The cases you will read in chapter four were written over several months of careful consideration of the data and thorough revisions. The data were collected via three interviews and two weeks of journaling, and as such, the cases are only glimpses into the lives of the participants. I made every attempt not to flatten their experiences and to present the cases with their voices intact.

By using case study research and using interviews and journaling to collect data, it is my hope that the cases presented in the next chapter clearly show how four island SGM youth understand their sexual and gender identities, how they learned about sexuality and gender, and who and what influenced their identity development. Because youth were recruited from one small Canadian province with a very small population, I had to omit certain details and stories from the cases to ensure participant anonymity. The completed case studies for Avery, Finn, Isabelle, and Mikey can be found in the following chapter.
Chapter 4: Case Studies

In this research, I set out to answer two research questions that relate to identity development for LGBTQ youth in PEI: “How do sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth in Prince Edward Island understand their gender and sexual identities during mid-adolescence?” And, “How does identifying as an SGM youth impact their day-to-day experiences in their schools, communities, and families?” In this chapter, I present four case studies that focus on the identity development experiences of Mikey, Isabelle, Finn, and Avery (pseudonyms). In writing the case studies, I aimed to summarize the participants’ gender and sexual identity development. Unlike many SGM studies with adults retrospectively answering questions about identity development, it is important to note that participants were aged 16–17 and their identities were still very much in development, and will continue to develop as they enter into and progress through adulthood.

What ties all cases together is that the cases focus on the participants’ understanding of how their sexual and gender identities have developed over time; however, each case unravels in dissimilar ways due to the different life experiences of the participants. Thus, each participant’s story has a different tone and focus. Mikey’s story deals with family relationships and rejection, religion, coming to terms with a trans identity, and moving to a new home. Isabelle’s story deals with being in foster care, navigating relationships with healthcare professionals, understanding her attractions and what it means for her identity, and trying to achieve good mental health. Finn’s story deals with understanding identity without attaching labels, trying to find balance while attaining good mental health, and pushing against societal norms, all without feeling a sense of
belonging at school or in an LGBTQ community. Avery’s story deals with strong family bonds, acceptance from friends, good mental and physical health, and her sexuality not being the only thing that defines her.

Case Study 1: Mikey

Mikey is a 16-year-old, pansexual/polysexual\(^8\), transmasculine\(^9\) person in grade 10 who is compassionate and humorous. In this case study, Mikey requested that I use they/them pronouns. Mikey is talented artistically in a variety of ways. Mikey is the middle child in a two-parent home. They describe their family home as a strict, Christian home. Their mother is “openly against all things gay” and their father was not physically and emotionally present for most of Mikey’s life due to long work hours and travel. Mikey has good relationships with their siblings.

Mikey’s understanding of their sexuality has changed over time, stating that their sexuality is fluid. When I asked Mikey about how they self-identified in terms of their sexual orientation, they shared the following:

*Personally, I identify as pansexual/polysexual, so what that means for me is I don’t really pay attention to gender. I am attracted to the person’s personality. I do find that I am more attracted to females, or assigned female at birth, and I would go for*

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\(^8\) Attraction can be broken down into romantic and sexual attraction. A romantic pansexual would be someone who would have a romantic relationship (not a sexual relationship) with people of any gender.

\(^9\) Transmasculine spectrum can include people with the following gender identities: man, male, transgender man, genderqueer, nonbinary, and people who were assigned female at birth (Jackman, Edgar, Ling, Honig, & Bockting, 2018).
non-binary people. I find myself more physically attracted to girls and more of a romantic pansexual. It’s really fluid. It changes all of the time.

When I asked about their gender identity, Mikey explained:

*I was going with trans boy, but trans-masc or transmasculine is what I am identifying as now. I find I really like they/them pronouns and I still really love he/him. I like both a lot. It has changed because I’ve been out in the world, out in school, and having more time to warm up to being out. It’s actually cool to be in a place where you can figure that stuff out about yourself. It’s really exciting.*

At the beginning of the data collection process Mikey was 15 years old, and they turned 16 before our third research interview. Mikey reflected on this birthday in our third interview: “Sixteen means a lot of things. Sixteen is an important birthday for every teenager, but for me, it means legal stuff and hormones and a whole new year for me to explore identities and I’m so excited.” During our interviews, Mikey spoke about wanting to start hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Turning 16 meant that Mikey legally had control of their own medical decisions, and with their aunt’s assistance in navigating the healthcare system, Mikey got onto the waitlist to see a doctor to discuss starting HRT.

Mikey’s identity journey is intricately tied to their relationship with family. Mikey’s understanding of their sexual and gender identities goes back as far as early childhood, and continued into pre-adolescence and adolescence.
Growing up afab\(^{10}\), I was very girly—forced to be. I wore dresses every Sunday to church and I had to wear dresses to school; the color pink was most of my wardrobe. At age 7, I started catching on, like, this isn’t me. I started rejecting everything.

Fast forward to about fifth grade when I started feeling really different. This is the age where the rest of the girls started having crushes. I felt really separate from it all. In grade 5, I started noticing that guys are nice, they’re my friends. But girls? Mhmm, let’s do that [laughing]. I started noticing I was more attracted to girls.

Oh my god, that girl is so pretty, as opposed to that boy is so cute. I felt really alone in that, and the bullying did not help.

At this time, Mikey was attending a small, rural school and was experiencing bullying by other students. They would call Mikey “dyke” and other hurtful words. At school, the word “gay” was often used in a derogatory way. During this time, Mikey was also dealing with mental health issues, including anxiety and depression, and this continued to the present day. When combined, Mikey’s self-discovery of identity, mental health issues, and school bullying eventually led to their decision to begin homeschooling. Mikey was homeschooled for grades 6 to 8. During this time, Mikey’s parents would only allow them to hang out with “designated Church friends.” As a result of this, and because of a tumultuous family and home life, Mikey shared that these years were very lonely. One

\(^{10}\) Assigned female at birth.
saying grace was receiving a second-hand laptop for homeschooling, and with this device Mikey began to explore their identity online.

In grade 6, I got my own laptop for homeschooling. That’s when I started Googling, “What does it mean if I have a crush on a girl?” because I’d heard of ‘gay’ but I didn’t know what it was. I found the weird side of YouTube, the very queer side, and I found other people online. I would watch videos and things would pop up, suggestions on the side, I saw things and I would be like, oh what’s that? I got really curious by the end of grade 6, like, is this me? I thought for sure that I was a lesbian by the end of grade 6. Then, I came out to my friend for the first time as a lesbian in grade 7 on a youth trip, and I found out that he was also gay. That was my first time coming out.

Then I started thinking, wait... I knew what transgender was at that point. One of the YouTubers I was watching did a collaborative video with another YouTuber who was trans, and like, what is this? What’s transgender? I began thinking about it for myself, but not deeply. It was really...[long pause]. I ignored the thought because it was so... bad. My parents had raised me in a way to think that all of this was the enemy and I still had so much internalized homophobia\(^{11}\) for myself. I hated myself for having those thoughts.

\(^{11}\) While Finn uses the term ‘internalized homophobia,’ it may actually be interpreted as an example of straight privilege, or heterosexual privilege.
Around grade 7, I started really hating myself and finally coming to terms with okay, I’m trans. I thought at the time I could still be a girl. I can be genderfluid. But that’s not how you do it. You don’t just choose your gender to please others, but that’s how I thought it worked. I identified as genderfluid and hid in that for a while.

In grade 8, I was still homeschooled, and I would get my work done early and I would journal and I’d read and I’d surf the web for quizzes on “Am I Gay?” and the quizzes told me that I was so, so fucking gay [laughing]. Like a confused and lost home-schooled kid, my only source of information was the internet.

I came out to my best friend in grade 8—one of my designated church friends. I wasn’t sure how she would take the transgender thing. She was like, “Are you going to tell your mommy?” No, I’m not going to tell my mother. She told her mom, and her mom was cool with it, sort of, because she had a brother-in-law who was gay, but her kids weren’t good with it. My friend treated me differently and I wasn’t allowed to go over for sleepovers anymore.

During the eight grade, Mikey’s mental health did not improve and they started to self-harm. Mikey’s brother was sympathetic and very supportive of them, and would often sit and talk with Mikey after they’d had a bad day. Mikey’s parents found out that they were self-harming, and Mikey began seeing a Christian counselor. Mikey shared their
feelings of depression with the counselor, and how it led to self-harm behavior.

Unfortunately, the response from the counselor was unhelpful and harmful.

_He told me, ‘You just have to pray about it.’ And he told me I was possessed at one point. He said I was possessed and listening to the devil; the devil made me do it, the devil made me cut myself. I felt so unheard and I retreated into my depression and just hid there._

Mikey stopped seeing the counselor after three sessions. Mikey did not share their sexuality or gender identity with the counselor, due to fear of reprisal, but did share their identity with their sister:

_In the summer after grade 8, I came out to my sister. She was like, oh my god, I’m so sorry, she was like bawling her eyes out. She said, I’m not crying because you’re gay, I’m crying because you have our mother. She knew how bad it was._

This period in Mikey’s life was rift with identity revelations and disclosures—voluntary and involuntary. During the summer after grade 8, Mikey and their brother attended a Christian church camp. The camp had an anonymous question box, and Mikey and their friend submitted questions about homosexuality and transsexuality, and how this is perceived by the church. The following day, counselors brought out chart paper and mapped out what it meant to be a woman and a man, and who it was you could partner with, a lesson with homo- and transphobic undertones and messaging. “I couldn’t even
stay for it, I felt so sick to my stomach that they were putting that out there, that hatred. Love thy neighbor, but not that one,” Mikey shared.

Mikey’s brother left camp a day early, and on his drive home with his mother, he shared that he thought Mikey was gay. The next day, Mikey returned home from camp along with a cousin who stayed the night at Mikey’s. When their cousin left, Mikey’s mother questioned them about what their brother had revealed in the car. This led to a family fight, and it led to Mikey going to stay with a friend. When Mikey returned home a few days later, “She didn’t even want to talk. She wouldn’t look at me. She wouldn’t speak. Then she told me the week before school was supposed to start, oh by the way, you’re going to public school.” Mikey was very nervous about this transition back into public school because they were still dealing with mental illness and they were still struggling with their identity.

Mikey entered into grade 9 in a small school, and that year, came out as trans and as “Mikey” to close friends.

I was talking to my friends. I was like, I’m not cis, so what am I? It just sort of formed, you’re Ari\textsuperscript{12} because it’s gender neutral, so that’s what happened. I tried that name for a while. I was sort of holding onto the gender binary and like, being female. It was hard; I was still going by my dead name\textsuperscript{13} with some people and Ari with other people, and it was just odd. I came out as genderfluid for a month, and

\textsuperscript{12} A pseudonym for a name that Mikey used temporarily, before coming out as Mikey.

\textsuperscript{13} Dead name is defined as “a term used by some transgender youth to describe a birth-assigned name that is no longer used” (Vance, 2018, p. 379).
then I was like, no, let’s just go all the way with it. I’m a guy. Let’s do that. I came out as Mikey to my friends.

While some friends accepted this, other friends rejected Mikey. “I felt so alone. I gave up completely. In grade 9, I started drinking. It was not good.” Mikey continued to self-harm in grade 9, began to talk back to teachers, and said they would end up in the counselors office almost every day due to their behavior. Mikey began to contemplate suicide.

I was in the library one day and I told my friend goodbye, basically. I was going to kill myself that night. She dragged me to the office. My guidance counselor drove me to the hospital and stayed with me. I finally got into processing. I would not look at my mother when she arrived. I could not look her in the eyes because I was so ashamed of who I was and I hated myself so much. I spent over a month in the hospital. It was my worst experience to date. Some of my nurses wouldn’t acknowledge my transgender identity, and they would brush it off like, you’re 15, you’re too young to know this. They used my dead name. My psychiatrist was a totally awful person. I was so lonely there. I was not heard, and I had to fake my way through it the whole time. I came out to my parents the first week there. I wrote my mother a carefully worded letter saying how I needed her to hear me out and to try to think about it. She looked me straight in the eye after reading the letter and said, “no,” and left the room.
Mikey’s time in the hospital was neither positive nor helpful. Mikey had to journal daily, and would allow their parents to read the entries. The hospital required that Mikey attend school only three days after being admitted, and would not allow them to wear long-sleeved shirts. Mikey’s arms had fresh and old scars visible, and they felt traumatized to have to show them at school when they were already in a vulnerable state. Mikey begged their guidance counselor to take them back to the hospital. Most of the hospital staff would use Mikey’s dead name. While Mikey was in the hospital, their parents went through their room at home and read Mikey’s private journals.

When Mikey came home from the hospital, they found that their door had been removed from their bedroom. For four months, Mikey was not able to see anyone or go anywhere other than school and the church youth group. Mikey had to do homework and all other activities where their parents could see them. Mikey continued to see the psychiatrist from their hospital stay, but it always felt like they were on trial. Mikey shared that their psychiatrist would yell at them, call them “slow” and “retarded,” accuse them of wasting time, and would speak to Mikey’s father behind their back. Currently, Mikey is on a waiting list for a new psychiatrist.

After being discharged from the hospital, and allowing time for settling in, life at home did not improve. In December, when Mikey was in tenth grade, they got into a blowout fight with their dad. Things escalated to near violence, and Mikey snuck the home phone into the basement, and called their aunt while hiding behind the freezer, telling their aunt, “Okay, it’s time.” Mikey was prepared for this moment. “We’d been ready since the summer, talking about me moving in when I turned 16. We were looking into the legal things. It just came to this point where it was like, no, we need to do this now.” Mikey’s
aunt came to talk to their parents, who didn’t take the suggestion that Mikey leave to live with her very well. When it looked like things were going to escalate, Mikey grabbed their already packed bag, and left with their aunt. Mikey has been living with their aunt ever since.

After moving into their aunt’s house permanently, Mikey would visit home occasionally and tried to improve the fractured relationship with their parents. “It was like walking on eggshells. When I stayed over, I just sort of did my homework like a good boy. I was so scared they were going to do or say something that would hurt me. I was scared that if I said anything it might steer them in that direction.” Mikey and their mother would spend time together at home, but Mikey admitted they would avoid the tough subjects. “My mom isn’t more accepting, she is just better at avoiding it.” Mikey wasn’t sure how they fit at home, if at all. Their parents would use their dead name, and Mikey’s parents turned their old room into an office after Mikey moved out. When Mikey would stay over, they would sleep in the guest room, which their parents had decorated in a very feminine way.

During one visit at home, Mikey’s father spoke about how men and women, in God’s eyes, are heterosexual. He told Mikey, “Girl parts don’t work properly with girl parts, and boy parts don’t work properly with boy parts. He went on to talk about how two women should not raise a child, and two men should not raise a child.” Later that day, when Mikey left, Mikey and their father got into a heated fight while texting. Mikey transcribed this conversation in their research journal. Mikey’s texts started off by explaining to their dad that maybe they shouldn’t venture into upsetting topics when visiting together. Mikey’s father sent multiple texts in response, including more
heterosexist, religious arguments about boy parts and girl parts, listed bible verses, spoke about God’s intention for men and women, and texted “I know you were born with girl parts so we’re not going to talk about this at this point,” which was extremely upsetting for Mikey.

Mikey was in an awkward place. They were living in a welcoming home with an aunt who emotionally supported and unconditionally loved and cared for Mikey; Mikey was experiencing an improvement in their grades at school, and they were excitedly contemplating hormone replacement therapy, all while struggling with their difficult relationship with their parents. Things were tense between Mikey and their parents, and Mikey wondered if they were going to be able to share their desire to start hormone replacement therapy. Mikey knew that when turning 16, they could legally make their own medical decisions and they did not have to tell their parents nor get their permission. However, Mikey wanted their acceptance and understanding. When things started to stabilize between Mikey and their parents, and it seemed like the relationship was improving, Mikey contemplated sharing this information. Mikey said, “I feel like I am on the cusp of something good, and I am excited for the shift. There is this big relief. There’s finally something going on.”

Unfortunately, things took a turn for the worse on Mikey’s 16th birthday, which happened to also be Mikey’s mother’s birthday.

I’d been trying to call her for weeks, and texting her, but she wasn’t answering.
Then on my birthday, I was texting my dad like, hey, can you tell mom to call me? I want to wish her a happy birthday. I didn’t hear from her, but I got text later
saying... here, I might just have to read some to you [Mikey takes out phone]: ‘I love you very much, and I miss you very much my beautiful daughter, [dead name]. I am heartbroken at your choices and the lies being told. I cannot pretend it’s okay. It’s not okay. I sit here today flooded with memories of the day you were born and placed into my arms, beautiful and perfectly made. I cried with joy and so did your father. I will never accept that you are trying to destroy that. I know you are in pain and you believe this is the way to happiness, but it’s not. I cannot tell you anything but the truth, and this is the truth: I will always love you more than you could ever understand, but I am done pretending and done with the lies and manipulation. You have made it very clear what you are choosing and that you do not want us as your parents. You have done many things that are not okay, and have hurt us deeply. But again, it is your choice. So, I cannot receive ‘happy birthday’ from you nor can I say it to you because it’s not; it’s the saddest day. I want my daughter in my arms, whole and healed, beautiful, loved, cherished, with your eyes open. I pray that someday you will see the truth and be free of all the lies and the pain. Again, it is your choice. I love you, [dead name]. I always will.’ I haven’t replied, because she basically disowned me right there. I got disowned on my birthday after months of trying to rebuild this relationship. It looks like I’m not going home again. I’m going to miss my siblings growing up. I am going to miss when my dog dies. They’re acting like I’m destroying everything. I am not destroying their lives. They’re destroying mine. I am only destroying this image, these assumptions that you had of your child. After I got out of the hospital, I told
my dad he’d rather have a dead daughter than a happy son. This is basically them saying that’s exactly what they’d rather have.

In addition to dealing with family issues, and adjusting to a new home and life with their aunt, Mikey deals with issues at school and with peers. Some teachers, including substitute teachers, refuse to use Mikey’s name and preferred pronouns, and will use their dead name and assumed pronouns instead. One teacher, when they found out that Mikey was trans, would not let them go to the bathroom. Mikey was angry at this injustice, but explained that teachers do not know what to do with trans students. “They did a presentation for teachers on LBGT stuff and acceptance. But people are like, ‘gay is fine,’ but as soon as you bring trans into it, they don’t know what to do with you.” Mikey explained what it feels like when a teacher misgenders them or uses their dead name: “The other day I had a teacher call me by my dead name and I fucking crumbled. I try so hard to pass as Mikey and all I want to do is get through the day where I don’t have to explain everything, or get sent to the office for ‘sassing the teacher’ because they wouldn’t call me by my name.” Mikey wished that more teachers, administrators, and staff understood the experiences of trans and non-binary students, that their school had more acceptance and inclusion, and more than one gender neutral washroom for trans and non-binary students to use.

In addition to negative teacher interactions, Mikey also experienced harassment from other students. For example, Mikey said “Today I got called an ‘it’ by one of the

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14 For others to properly perceive your gender expression and identity. For Mikey, they want others to recognize them as a transmasculine person.
people I thought was my friend. It was just a normal conversation until we started talking
about dating and preferences, and they said, ‘Well I’m sorry, but not sorry, I would never
touch an ‘it’ like this,’ and gestures to me, ‘let alone sleep with one.’” Another time, a
student asked Mikey in full volume in front of others if they had a penis. In Mikey’s
research journal, they wrote: “Mostly, I feel super alone in this. I don’t have a lot of people
I can relate to.” Mikey noted that there are not many openly trans-identifying and non-
binary students at their school, only three others that Mikey was able to recall. The same
goes for students openly self-identifying as not-heterosexual. “They’re too afraid to come
out. I know there are more people who haven’t come out because they’re afraid. Our
school has a no tolerance policy for discrimination and bullying, but people are afraid
because it’s not upheld a lot of the time.”

When thinking about factors that supported Mikey’s sexual and gender identity
development, they recalled that one major positive influence was being able to use the
internet to research identities and sexuality. Mikey’s exploration of their identity deepened
when they received their first computer and were able to find answers to all of their
questions. Mikey shared that they were able to research identity labels and categories and
assess their fit and comfortability. While it was helpful to discover information online,
Mikey shared that it was difficult to accept their SGM identity because of their
unsupportive home environment, and because they experienced homophobic and
transphobic bullying at school.

Because of these experiences, Mikey had mental health issues that led to various
coping behaviors, including alcohol consumption and self-harm. When Mikey navigated
the mental health system, they shared that they had had only negative experiences with
counselors, psychiatrists, nurses, and doctors. According to Mikey, these healthcare professionals consistently denied and ignored their identity and experiences. When Mikey was still living at home, they recall not having parental support in navigating the healthcare system. However, when Mikey left home and moved in with their aunt, Mikey said they now experienced unconditional identity acceptance and approval, and had an aunt who became an advocate and a helpful guide when Mikey required assistance navigating the healthcare system.

Mikey shared their future plans to enter into law enforcement, and more generally to “be someone who helps someone find themselves or encourages them. I want to be a supporter. I want to be someone who contributes to making it better.” More immediately in the future, Mikey wants to begin hormone replacement therapy, and is currently on the waitlist to see a doctor in another province. During our interviews, the Prince Edward Island government still had not committed to covering gender affirming healthcare and surgeries for transgender and non-binary islanders, and both Mikey and I had written letters as part of an island letter writing campaign for change. A few days after our last interview, the Government of PEI announced that transgender and non-binary islanders would now have access to gender affirming surgeries and healthcare in PEI. Mikey and I celebrated in an email exchange, knowing that this was a significant moment in history.

To end Mikey’s case study, I want to share a segment of a poem Mikey wrote in their research journal, and also a quote from Mikey. These snippets reveal that Mikey is still on a journey of self-discovery, but that their newfound self-acceptance and self-love is growing.

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The frost nips at my nose as I roam
These empty streets and cracked sidewalks
My eyes sting with the wind as it tries
To catch my breath and compromise
My balance
My ears burn with anticipation
I am not a wanderer
I have a destination

--

“My name is Mikey. I am a transmasculine identifying person.
My pronouns are he and they and I am valid. I am worth it.”

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Case Study 2: Isabelle

Isabelle is a 17-year old, bisexual, and cisgender woman in grade 11. Isabelle lives with a foster family, and is currently the only foster child living at home, though she has many foster siblings. While the relationship was not always perfect, Isabelle currently has a trusting relationship with her foster mother. Isabelle keeps busy with several after-school activities, part-time work, and volunteering. Isabelle is fiercely independent, strong-willed, and goal-oriented.

While Isabelle was always certain about her gender identity, she was not always certain about her sexual identity. She began to question her sexuality in grade 7 when she began feeling attraction toward other women.
I realized I wasn’t straight in grade 7, so I would have been around 13 or 14 years old. It was mostly attraction, first of all, and then it was like, I don’t know what this is. A lot of confusion for a while. In grade 7, I was kind of just figuring it out. I went to a very conservative elementary school where I never really heard anything about sex or sexuality until I went to middle school. We just didn’t talk about sexuality. It didn’t exist. I had these feelings: I like girls but I also like guys, so what is this? I wasn’t taught about sexuality, so I was confused for years over who I was.

In grade 7, I was very attracted to girls. I thought, okay, so I have to be a guy now? That was my first thought. Now I have to be a guy because girls can’t like girls, and guys can’t like guys. So, I have to be a guy. I was trying to understand that attraction. When I had a crush on a girl in grade 8, and after some research online and on social media, I thought okay, maybe I don’t have to be a guy. In grade 9, I dated a girl. I liked girls a lot more at that time, so I started asking, does that mean I’m gay? I was confused because I thought I couldn’t like both genders—that’s so wrong! I was so close-minded because what I’d be taught.

For about a year, that was me, thinking I might be gay because I much preferred girls over guys. There were very few guys I was attracted to, so I thought there was either bad pickings at my school, or I was gay. I used the internet to do research to try and figure out these feelings.
I came out to my friend, and then my youth worker. She was the first person I really told when I was ready to tell, and she said, “I know.” And I asked, “Oh?” She said, “You constantly talk about [a girl crush] and when you do, you’re very happy and outgoing.”

In grade 10, I came out to all of my friends. I said, I can’t tell you if I’m bisexual or gay, but I’m something, and I like girls and guys. My friend said to me, “You’re bisexual!” and I was like, but I like girls more than guys, and she said you’re still bisexual, it’s just who you are. So, okay! She was bisexual, too, so she was in the same boat. She talked me through that. It felt good to be out. It felt like a big weight off of my shoulders. I felt like I didn’t have to hide anymore.

Over the years, my preferences have changed. But now, I like girls a lot more than guys, even though I have a boyfriend who I love and stuff. For me, it’s changed because I became more open to the idea of being bisexual.

Despite feeling like her friends accepted her identity, Isabelle did experience biphobic prejudice from male peers. They would tell her that she needed to pick a side, to choose men or women, and that she could not choose both. Isabelle shared that while this happens with male peers, it has never happened with adults in her life, friends, or her partners. In the end, Isabelle did not hold negative feelings about her male peers. She explained: “It doesn’t make me question my identity. I think it’s probably because of how they were raised, you know? That’s how they’ve been taught their whole lives. I can’t
blame them for that.” Isabelle explained that most of her female friends are also queer or bisexual, and it makes her feel good about her identity, and it makes her feel included. She also shared that online spaces that respect bisexual identity are key to accepting and feeling good about her sexuality.

In reflecting on what helped her figure out her sexual identity, Isabelle shared that the internet and doing research online filled the information gaps left by a lack of sexuality education at school. In the following quotes, Isabelle shares her experiences at school with sexuality education:

In elementary school, they divided us up into two groups, boys and girls, and they told the girls they were going to get their periods soon. Our sex education was based on puberty. In grade 6, we had a health nurse come in and she was like, sex is a thing, this is how you make babies, and at the same time, she said you should wait until after marriage. She really focused on sex after marriage, and didn’t say anything about the risks or benefits of having sex.

In middle school, there was a little of the “sex is for marriage” and “between two people who love each other” stuff, but still very much focused on puberty. In grade 7, it worked its way up to include unplanned pregnancy, what happens to your body when you’re pregnant, how to stay safe, STIs, and stuff like that. In grades 6, 7, and 8, it was all baby-oriented in some way, like sex is to make babies and that’s all. No one talked about sex and pleasure until I would say grade 9. In grade 9 it changed, all of a sudden there was a shift. People had sex for pleasure, we got
taught, you know those woody things? They call them woodies. We practiced putting a condom on. But, they didn’t talk about sexuality or sexual identity. The closest thing we got to talking about sexuality was a kid in our class asking, “What is gay sex?” and the teacher said, “Okay, moving on.” I’m probably not going to learn about gender or sexual identity at this school.

Because Isabelle did not receive comprehensive sexual health education at school, she used the internet to do research and learned about gender and sexuality on social media.

I’ve used the internet to do research about gender and sexuality. On social media, like Instagram or Tumblr, I would follow LGBTQ things. For a few years, I had a fake Instagram account for queer content, and I talked to people and made friends. It felt safer that way. I used it on a daily basis.

Isabelle would also seek out queer content on Netflix because LGBTQ issues and relationships were not commonly portrayed on regular TV.

I would find queer movies on Netflix once in a while, when I was in the mood for a lesbian or gay movie. Though, the characters are often very stereotypical, like one girl has short hair and wears boy clothing. It should be more a part of regular media and TV but it’s not. It’s a sub-genre. If you were to go and watch something, the first relationship you’d find is between a guy and girl. Like, you see stuff like that all the time. You’re not going to find a queer relationship in a
television show. It should be the norm, but it’s not, so you have to go out and find that stuff for yourself.

The whole thing about me having to be a guy to like a girl? That whole thing? I learned that from TV. Every lesbian relationship I saw on TV had one butch girl and one feminine girl, and that’s the way lesbian relationships were shown. I thought I had to be one of the two. Because I was seeing that, it unconsciously impacted me.

While Isabelle sought out information online to help her understand her sexuality, she was also dealing with acceptance and validation of her sexuality with her peers, friends, and family. Isabelle noted that while many of her friends were accepting, she experienced some harassment at school and noticed other LGBTQ students also experiencing bullying. Because it was happening to students around her, Isabelle feared that she would also be bullied for her sexual identity.

Just a few days ago, someone was being treated really rudely because they came out as pansexual and people were making fun of her and stuff. She told some people, and those people told other people, and it got around really fast. I don’t think that’s what she wanted. There were a couple of guys who picked on her all class and made jokes.
The principal just let the two guys off with a warning. Just a warning despite the student being harassed. They didn’t get into trouble.

It made me feel worried that if it ever got out that I was bisexual, stuff like that might happen to me too. The way she was treated was super shitty. To see it in my school surprised me, because there are people in my school that are openly gay. But I guess at the same time, there are people who are very close-minded and believe it’s wrong and the worst thing you can be.

I have this other friend who is questioning and trans, and he’s teased a lot. People don’t respect that he’s transgender. They use the wrong pronouns and are not respectful of him as a person. Even teachers don’t respect his pronouns. He doesn’t want to make a big deal out of it. If he wanted to speak up, he would, because he’s the type of person who would say something. Like, he corrects his friends, “no it’s he/him.” But with teachers, he doesn’t say anything. I don’t know if it’s the whole “Respect your teacher” thing, or if it’s because of something else.

Once in a while, someone at school will make a joke or call me a faggot or something, but I just brush it off. I don’t let it bother me because you know what? It’s just your opinion. I am positive about who I am, and it takes a lot to offend me.

At home, Isabelle’s foster mother and her family members know about her bisexuality. However, the way in which her foster mother found out about Isabelle’s
sexuality was by reading her Facebook messages when Isabelle wasn’t home. Isabelle and her foster mother eventually reconciled and Isabelle was able to trust her mother again. After disclosing her sexual identity, Isabelle experienced difficulty in her relationship with her foster mother’s daughter-in-law, but noted that things are better.

I didn’t get a chance to tell my foster mom myself that I was bisexual. More or less, she looked through my Facebook and saw messages to my friends and put two and two together. She forced me to tell her, and sat me down on the couch and asked, are you gay? I just broke down because I wasn’t ready to tell her. I know she feels bad about it now.

Over time, I’ve opened back up to her and I can trust her with things and she can trust me because we talk. She’s also more accepting than she was at first. I never felt like she liked me any less for it, though.

I ended up coming out to the rest of my foster family on my own time, which was nice, and she let me do that. They had a lot of questions. I did get some judgement from my foster mom’s daughter-in-law. Before she found out, she was very open with me, and sisterly, and when she found out, it was like a door just closed. She kind of pushed me away. It is better now, the door is back open.

During the years that Isabelle explored her identity and sexuality, she also dealt with mental health issues, specifically anxiety and depression. A large part of Isabelle’s
interviews were about managing mental illness, navigating the healthcare system, and building relationships with healthcare professionals all while being a busy teenage girl. In the following quotes, Isabelle recounts her time spent in the hospital during her grade 9 year, when she was struggling with her identity and managing her mental health.

*It had gotten to a point where I was pushing it down and I made myself feel bad about it, and I couldn’t deal with it and I wasn’t in a good place to deal with it at the time. It just pushed me over the edge. When I felt like I had to go to unit 9, the first person I talked to was my school counselor. When I got to the hospital, one of the first couple of things the intake nurse asks was like, “Why are you here?” and when I was getting ready to be put into unit 9, they asked if I had a boyfriend they could call. At the time I was dating a transgender woman so I said no, but I do have a girlfriend. They said okay, you know you can’t talk to anyone outside of your immediate family. I said, well you just said you would contact my boyfriend, so I am confused, you won’t contact my girlfriend? She kind of stuttered and immediately moved on and pretended that she didn’t bring it up.*

*The first week I was in emergency because of overflow. And technically, I didn’t get into unit 9, but I got placed into unit 5 which is pediatrics. But every day I would go to unit 9 for the day, and I would do some activities and group sessions. I never got to talk to someone one-on-one about how to deal with my problems. I’d be in unit 9 for about five hours every day, and the rest of the time I’d be sitting in my room doing nothing, just thinking, thinking, thinking. My foster mom would*
visit me every day for an hour or two, and that was the highlight of my day because I got to talk to someone. It was the closest thing to private counseling that I got.

I felt very lonely. They took all of my things and put them in bags and locked them away. If I wanted something, I had to go and ask for it. I have fairly bad anxiety, right, so I was uncomfortable doing that.

Toward the end of my stay, during the last week, they assigned me a psychiatrist that I talked to once while I was there. I talked to him for maybe half an hour. It wasn’t about how I was doing or what I’m dealing with, it was to diagnose me and prescribe medication.

The medication he prescribed hurt my stomach and I would tell the nurses and they would say, you have to take it. I would strongly refuse, and they’d say if you don’t take it, we’re going to hold you down and you’re going to take it. So okay, I’ll take it then, I don’t want to be held down. I remember being in my bed there, curled up in a ball crying because my stomach hurt so much.

Since getting out of unit 9, I am feeling better, but not because of my time there, I’ll say that right now. But because of myself. Mental healthcare on PEI is bullshit.

Since her stay in the hospital, Isabelle began seeing a psychiatrist from another province via teleconference due to a shortage of island psychiatrists, and also began seeing
Isabelle shared that the teleconference sessions are brief and frustrating: “It doesn’t feel like he listens to me. When I got to talk to him, every two months, I go in there, he asks me four questions, and then I leave.” The psychiatrist also had Isabelle attend group therapy sessions, despite her protestations that she had tried group therapy before but didn’t find it useful. After completing the 8-week program, with no positive impacts reported by Isabelle, her psychiatrist referred her to a private psychologist for one-on-one counseling. Isabelle shared that she was really happy about this, and after their first session, was pleased that her psychologist was an open-minded person regarding Isabelle’s sexuality. Isabelle now sees her psychologist every two weeks to help manage her anxiety, and speaks to her psychiatrist via teleconference.

During our last interview, Isabelle shared that she stopped taking the medication that hurt her stomach and is now feeling better than she has in a long time. She spoke about moving out into an extended care facility, and about her plans for higher education. Because she is in the foster care system, she will receive help with finances, her living arrangements, and will receive financial assistance for her college tuition. Isabelle was excited to finish high school and to start her career in social work. “I’m nervous, but I’m also really excited about it. I feel like I’ll do really good. It’s a huge step moving out on my own, but I’ll have help and support.” Her foster mother and social worker are supportive of Isabelle’s desire to move into extended care, because Isabelle is independent and responsible.

When I asked Isabelle why she wanted to take part in the research study, she said: “If I am able to make a small difference, I want to be a part of that.” She hoped her story would make an impact on education in PEI, specifically:
I hope there’s an impact on sex education in PEI, especially the middle school curriculum, it needs to include trans and non-binary stuff; people who are out there need to know these things. Some kids don’t know that it’s okay to be gay. I didn’t know that. Also, I want teachers talking about safe and pleasurable sex.

Additionally, Isabelle hoped her story would improve healthcare in PEI: “We don’t have enough psychiatrists in PEI and there are really long waitlists.” She also would like frontline staff, like intake nurses, to be more sensitive about gender and sexual identity. Looking back on her experience doing interviews and journaling, she told me: “I think this is going to be something I look fondly at.”

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**Case Study 3: Finn**

Finn is a 16-year-old queer person in grade 11. Finn is artistically inclined, as well as a self-defined overachiever and perfectionist. Their parents have been remarried several times, and as a result, Finn has many siblings, though is only close with one sister. Finn has a fairly neutral relationship with their parents. Finn is an avid volunteer in their community and also works part-time.

When discussing their sexual and gender identity, Finn explained that they do not use labels or categories; rather, Finn chooses to use reference points that can help others understand how they understand themselves. Finn explained that grey gender and pansexuality are useful terms and reference points. They asked that I use they/them in my writing, but are ultimately indifferent about pronoun usage in daily life.
While Finn started thinking about gender and sexuality in middle school, they noticed that they did not have a lot of attraction to other people during their childhood and early adolescence.

*I just wasn’t attracted to a lot of people, especially in my teenage years leading up to now. Not so much. When I found myself attracted to others, it would be boys who were not typically masculine, so I would wonder, like, am I gay? But I wasn’t attracted to people who were super feminine, either. So, now, I would say I have a big attraction to androgyny. Who I’ve been attracted to over the course of my life has changed drastically. There was one point in time that I was attracted to guys, but now not so much. Right now the person I am primarily spending my time with is someone who is non-binary.*

*I wouldn’t say that I have a particular label, though. Pansexual is one that is cool, and I did find one recently that was cool, it’s scoliosexual\(^{15}\). Labels don’t work for me because I don’t want something that will dictate who I will date in the future. I just want to be able to show people who I am dating, and be like, that’s the person I am dating.*

*In terms of where I am in my attraction to people, I would say that I don’t know. The thing that’s hard to separate is that I was a person who grew up around* 

\(^{15}\) Someone who is attracted to non-binary, transgender, and/or genderqueer people.
divorce, and watching people go through breakups, my mom and dad have both been married several times, and watching stuff like that makes it hard to open up to people. I am afraid of opening up to people or entering a romantic relationship, so sometimes my sexual or romantic attraction is hard to define because it’s hard to separate if it’s because of what’s happened in the past or because I don’t experience a lot of attraction.

That’s something I am struggling with lately. Is it that I am not romantically attracted to this person? Or, is it that I have a hard time opening up and sharing? Growing up, my dad was good at lying, he’s a bit of a pathological liar, and I think growing up around that makes me mistrust people sometimes. Like, are you really saying that? Am I a person that you’re really attracted to, or are you just saying that? When you can’t trust someone who’s that integral to your life, then you don’t trust other people.

So, if I had to define my attractions, I’m like, do I not experience a lot of romantic or sexual attraction? Or is it that I have stuff about me that I have to work out? Is it a wall that I put up myself? Or is it something that is inherent about me?

Finn was still trying to understand their attractions and to discover the link between their childhood and family experiences and how they relate to other people. Finn explained that by using reference points instead of concrete labels, they could be attracted to any person, regardless of gender identity, and it could change over time. The same goes for
Finn’s gender identity. They use the reference point of grey gender, which they explain in their own terms:

*I’m not a person who is huge on labels. I think they’re super fascinating, but they don’t typically work that well for me. They usually work better as points of reference. It’s like, if I were to describe myself, it would be around this area. A lot of times people find a label and think, ‘Oh I have to fit into this always,’ and I can’t. I think it’s restricting. It’s almost feeding into the thing that we’re trying to avoid. The reason people are so transphobic and heteronormative is because we’ve been trying to fit into these boxes for years. I don’t think it solves a problem by trying to pile a bunch of labels on yourself.*

*I’ve been doing some research lately about things that I identify in the area of, so I would say kind of grey gender. So, I am indifferent to pronouns and everything like that. I get people who call me ‘he.’ Some people will see my short hair and think I’m non-binary, if they’re read up on gender, they’ll right off the bat use ‘they,’ not thinking I’m non-binary but not knowing, it’s kind of ambiguous. The difference between me and a binary trans person is that I have the privilege that if people call me my gender assigned at birth or my pronouns assigned at birth, it doesn’t bother me, because I just don’t totally relate to it. There’s no adverse effect, whereas if you’re trans and identify in a specific way, then it’s like sometimes it can actually be insulting or harmful to be misgendered and it definitely hurts you.*
One thing I am paranoid about is that people think I am a special snowflake, which is a word that I hate. That’s why I might stumble over definitions because I don’t tell them to other people a lot because I think they’re judging me. So, grey gender, the way I heard it, or the way it was explained to me, I saw it on the Internet and it’s like, you’re gender-indifferent, you feel like... not necessarily agender in the sense that you feel like you don’t have a gender, but you’re just kind of like whatever, you’re indifferent. It’s kind of grey. You’re indifferent in terms of pronoun use, like people could call you any valid pronoun within reason and it doesn’t bother you. I don’t have a strong connection to gender, or to things people call me, or my appearance. I would say I am pretty neutral so I don’t dress particularly masculine or feminine. I don’t have a strong connection [to gender] so I don’t experience any dysphoria, or if someone calls me the wrong pronoun or refers to me as the wrong gender, I don’t care.

I don’t enjoy the idea of spectrums, they just don’t click with me. But, here is this label—grey gender—and I am somewhere around it. If someone were to ask me, it would be like, here’s a benchmark, here’s a reference point, so you have an idea for the general vicinity that I’m in. But, I’m not going to follow those rules all of the time.

Finn said that social media, the internet, and school have each played a role in their learning about and understanding their sexuality and gender identity. Social media and the
internet—specifically YouTube—have provided a way for Finn to see other LGBTQ and queer people explore their identities online.

*Social media is big. It’s nice to see representations of people, like actual real people, to see the person and their videos where they’re discussing the coming out process or how their life is. It just normalizes it. There can be people who make videos who happen to be queer, I like that it’s more normal now.*

*I would say that watching videos and educating myself [online] was not only a way to learn about other people and how they felt, but how I felt as well. Sometimes in the process of learning about gender, you’re trying to figure out what’s up with you, but sometimes you don’t know the proper terms to guide you. It’s also good to learn about things even if they don’t pertain to you.*

*It was on YouTube that I learned about grey gender. It was on a YouTube channel, Ash Hardell. I watched their video on their partner, Grace, talking about gender and explaining grey gender and gender indifference, so I stumbled across it there.*

They’ve also learned about sex, sexuality, and gender in the school setting, from library books and from certain teachers. Overall, though, Finn noted that their teachers have to do a better job at bringing LBGTQ issues and content to the forefront, and this includes creating a GSA at their school.
So, media for sure has been an influence, but not just social media—which is huge—but for me it was also books. Our library had a gender and sexuality week, where the librarian had books on a shelf that you should read that week, like topics about queer life, and not necessarily romantic novels, but coming out and sexual health. Even if people don’t pick up those books, they’re still out there and people see them, they’re visible. That was the most helpful thing for me in middle school. It wasn’t just queer sexuality, there were also books about families, books with transgender parents, because kids might not be queer themselves, but they might have a relative who is, and need education on that.

While Finn’s school has many queer, trans, and non-binary students, there is no gender and sexuality alliance at the school. To feel included, Finn said many of these students enroll in band and drama classes because of the opportunity to build community. At the school, it seems like band and drama classes are safer spaces, and Finn says that LGBTQ students are drawn to them because of the trust and care that can develop in those spaces: “It’s almost like a family.” However, even in these more inclusive spaces, students can still be misgendered.

*I’m thinking about one person in my drama class, they go by ‘they,’ and identify as genderqueer and non-binary and a lot of times people will call them by their dead name or call them ‘she’ rather than ‘they.’ I try and correct people by being like, “Their real name is not this, it’s this” or I’ll call them by their real name and emphasize it a bit. Every time I hear people misgender them, [sharp intake of
breath] I feel it. I make sure that I call them by their right pronouns because even if there’s one person who is affirming you, it’s better than no one affirming you at all.

Finn felt included in these spaces, but argued that the school itself needs to do better in supporting students who are bullied, targeted, and discriminated against. For example, teachers often won’t address comments like “That’s so gay,” or when students in the class misgender a classmate or use their dead name. Additionally, according to Finn, teachers aren’t equipped to deal with the cyberbullying that occurs between students, like sending unwanted, sexually explicit pictures. Finn shared that in response to the lack of curriculum dealing with cyberbullying in particular, students at Finn’s school started an educational group to teach middle school children about the dangers of sharing personal information online. However, there was resistance in this group to include anything queer, because the group felt like the topics were too sensitive and not age-appropriate for middle school students.

Teachers also subscribed to heteronormative beliefs. For example, Finn shared:

*It just irks me when a teacher, jokingly, will say, ‘Who are you texting, your boyfriend?’ to a student who identifies as female. It just makes me mad. Or, in law class when the teacher will say like, ‘A husband wants to divorce his wife,’ it’s like, well there are more people than that, you could just say someone wants to divorce their partner.*
Additionally, according to Finn, the sexual health curriculum needs to approach sexual health from a queer perspective. In addition to this change, Finn had several other recommendations, including a representative group put in charge of updating the curriculum (“a group that isn’t all old, white, heterosexual men”) which includes young people and queer people. With the current curriculum, Finn explained that if you are a student who doesn’t identify exclusively as cisgender or heterosexual, your education in this area will be lacking:

* A lot of times queer identities aren’t discussed, and you don’t get that exposure. Or like, you don’t have to worry about sexual health because you’re in a queer relationship. Like, I had no idea what dental dams were until six months ago. I learned about them from a resource board at a pride poetry slam event. For people my age who might be sexually active with a partner with vulvas, this is important to know!

* Sex education needs to move beyond abstinence only and heterosexual education. Heterosexual sexual health education isn’t useful to all people. People think if you’re not in a relationship with someone of the opposite sex, then I don’t need protection. It’s concerning because how are people supposed to know? You can’t just rely on common sense.

Outside of school, Finn does have a few people that they can discuss their sexuality and gender with, and these conversations help Finn further understand their identity. Finn
specifically mentioned their sister, a close friend, and a co-worker. Finn found out their sister was not entirely heterosexual, and realized that they had internalized homophobia to deal with: “She opened up and shared that she’s typically attracted to guys but doesn’t care who she’s in love with. It was cool. I didn’t know that, and realized I have internalized homophobia, like assuming people are straight, right off the bat, as default.” Finn also gets together regularly with a nonbinary trans friend and they jokingly call their coffee meet-ups “group therapy.” Finn says their friendship works because they have had comparable experiences and think in similar ways. Lastly, knowing that their co-worker was bisexual and likely an open and safe person to talk to, Finn confided that they were dating someone who was non-binary. Finn didn’t disclose their identity, but shared that they’d gone on a date. Finn didn’t feel the need to bring their identity into it, as “it just speaks for itself. It was like saying I’m not heterosexual, without having to announce it.”

While feeling as though there are people who accept and love them, like their sister, friend, and co-worker, Finn doesn’t feel a part of their school and LBGTQ community.

*I don’t feel like I totally belong at school. Not always because of my gender and sexual identity, but I have a hard time integrating with things outside of band class. I have a difficult time being a part of my school community. As well, I feel it’s difficult for me to integrate into the queer population because I’m not totally comfortable with myself yet. I definitely feel I have a distance from a lot of people at school.*
Feeling excluded in this way impacts Finn’s mental health. Finn struggled with sustaining their mental health due to stress, overworking, and ineffective coping skills. Finn described how their mind and body just “shut down” when they have too much on the go, and described the paralyzing feeling they experience: “It’s like, I care so much. I care so much that I’m thinking about everything so much, so much so that I can’t do it. I have a problem with overthinking things.” When they are very stressed, they engage in unhelpful coping mechanisms such as stress eating and staying in bed. “I would say that my coping skills would consist of lying in bed and eating food. I wouldn’t say that what I do is healthy.” Finn admitted that they’ve never sought help before, but perhaps it would be helpful to do so, and they could avoid the slump that they fall into.

When attempting to understand their sexual and gender identity, Finn was determined to avoid labels and self-categorizations. They would prefer that people see them as a whole person, rather than solely identified by their sexuality or gender identity. They would prefer showing people around them who they are dating, if anyone, rather than putting a label onto the relationship. Finn wants to normalize identity uncertainty and exploration, as well as normalize non-cisgender and non-heterosexual identities and relationships.

One way to achieve this, from Finn’s perspective, is for the school to have a gender and sexuality alliance, or a similar group where people can explore their identities freely and without judgement. Finn wants to see change, but is exhausted, a sentiment commonly shared by individuals seeking social justice and equality. In this quote, Finn recognizes their own limits, as a busy queer 16-year-old, volunteer, and part-time worker, they may not be able to be a change agent in this moment. In order to see the creation of a queer
space in their school, it may require someone else, perhaps a teacher or counselor, to do the heavy lifting:

*I’m hoping to get the confidence to go to my school and create a space, but I don’t know if I have the confidence yet, and I think that’s okay. It’s like wanting to build a well for water but you’re thirsty and so worn out, so you can’t build that well. You have to recognize that sometimes other people have to create those spaces for people who aren’t comfortable doing it by themselves. In some cases, people can’t boldly go out and make spaces for themselves because they aren’t comfortable sharing yet, or they’re shy, or they don’t fully understand their identity and need those spaces to figure it out, but the space hasn’t been created.*

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**Case Study 4: Avery**

Avery is a 16-year-old pansexual, cisgender woman in grade 11. Avery is hardworking and has a no-nonsense attitude. She works part-time and is athletic and involved in sports. Avery enjoys spending her leisurely time outdoors, and finds happiness in doing so. Avery is very close with her family, and has several strong friendships and friend groups where she feels accepted and welcomed. While her sexuality is something that Avery is interested in exploring, it isn’t in the forefront of her life and experiences. She started thinking about her sexuality when she was around 13 years old.

*I was becoming a teenager and that’s when most kids start realizing those things. I was 13 and it was pretty obvious to me because I was attracted to someone of the*
same gender. I don’t think I knew the term at the time, and it didn’t matter to me. When it started to matter, I tried to find out the term. I do remember hearing the term bisexual in a movie. There was a bisexual character, and that might have been the first time I heard about it; before that, I thought there was just gay and straight people.

I first spoke to my cousin, Charlotte,\textsuperscript{16} about my sexual identity. It was a positive experience, and I found out that she was pansexual, too! I did want to have more of a conversation with her about it, but it ended rather quickly. She said something stupid like, “Join the club” or something, and we joked about it for a bit.

After telling Charlotte that she was pansexual when she was 13, Avery didn’t reveal her identity to anyone else until telling her parents when she was 15. Her parents were accepting and had a positive reaction to Avery’s confession. Avery said, “my mom was like yeah cool whatever, and my dad didn’t mind.” As a rule, though, Avery doesn’t share her sexual identity with other people, unless someone asks.

It’s just like, I don’t need to tell everybody. It’s normal. If I become friends with someone, I’ll tell them. With my peers, I’ll let them know, and if they don’t like it, they’re not good friends. But I usually keep that information to myself. If it comes up in conversation, or I’m asked about it, I’ll tell the truth, but if there’s no reason for it to come up, I won’t bring it up.

\textsuperscript{16} Pseudonym
Sometimes I’m afraid that someone will be unfriendly or something if they found out that I was queer. It’s probably why I am uncomfortable telling people. It’s hard for me to come out and say it to new people, especially if they’re straight. I have a hard time communicating it to those people because I am not sure if they’ll be accepting or nice about it, which makes it worse.

Sometimes there are people who choose to disagree with being LBGTQ and that sucks. I guess I’ve had some negative experiences. Some people just don’t agree with it. I see some people refusing to use people’s right pronouns. I wish they would just be nice and don’t be rude and inconsiderate. I was really shocked when my trans friend told me what they were going through.

According to Avery, the biggest influences on her understanding of her identity have been her cousin, Charlotte and a friend, Steven. Avery shared that her cousin felt courageous enough to come out because of Steven, and Avery felt confident to come out because of Charlotte. Having Steven around and having conversations with them was what helped Avery develop a deeper and broader understanding of gender and sexuality. Before meeting Steven, who is trans, Avery said they didn’t know what trans was. She explained, “The first time that I learned that trans people existed was when I met Steven. Before meeting them, I didn’t know it existed.” Avery also used the internet to research her

17 Pseudonym
questions about sexuality, and had access to a desktop computer when she was first exploring her identity at age 13.

In Avery’s friend groups, she says she has a lot of friends who identify as queer in some way. She has noticed that while a lot of students at her high school are also outwardly identifying as queer, there is no gender and sexuality alliance at her school.

*I don’t really think there is an LGBTQ community at our school, and there is no GSA. I have a lot of friends that are queer, but does that count as community? I think it does, sort of. It would be nice for our school to have a GSA, though, because I don’t know, there’s no reason why you wouldn’t have one? I heard from a friend who must have asked about a GSA, that my school said they didn’t need one. So, why wouldn’t we need one? It would be weird if my school thought that there were no LGBTQ students in a school this big. A GSA would be great. At my school, I think a lot of students don’t even know what queer means… it feels normal with all of my friends, but abnormal for most other people.*

Avery’s school has gender neutral washrooms, but does not provide gender neutral change rooms. Avery has noticed that some classrooms have “rainbow stickers” but that teachers do not explicitly talk about gender and sexuality or welcome such conversations, and that sexuality education is severely lacking or not present. Altogether, these factors contribute to a school climate where bullying happens frequently—and does, according to Avery. Avery experienced severe bullying during elementary school and grade 7, and ultimately left school to be homeschooled for grades 8 and 9. Avery shared that the
bullying she experienced was not due to her sexual or gender identity, but for other reasons she did not want included in this narrative. Upon returning to public school in grade 10, Avery noticed that many of her queer peers were being bullied by other students, and that teachers were engaging in microaggressions by misgendering students and using dead names, either by accident or on purpose.

In elementary and middle school, there was a lot of racism, homophobia, and transphobia. People were so judgmental if someone identified as queer. There was this one kid who everyone would call a faggot and then people would use Asian slurs because there was a lot of Asian people at that school, and I was like, excuse me? They have to know that that’s not actually okay. Do they get it from their parents? Or is it like when I was younger and I literally thought that gay was bad, even though my parents were okay with it and we had gay friends. I was in school with all of these people that thought that, and they would be like “That’s so gay” or whatever. My parents explained to me that gay was okay, that it was good, and I was like, well great. At my school, though, I’d be afraid to be like, “Oh, gay is actually good” because I didn’t want to... I was in a place where I was not fitting in at all, and I didn’t want people rolling their eyes at me and glaring at me and other things. I didn’t want to have any negative experiences, but they still ended up happening.
Even though that was years ago, people are still being bullied. My friend Neil\(^\text{18}\), you saw him earlier in the hall, there’s a kid that won’t call Neil by his pronouns, and it’s this big dramatic thing. It started with this person making fun of him in a poke-fun way, but now... I don’t know, they were joking around and Neil said, “You wanna fight?” and the other guy said, “I don’t fight girls” and it’s like, no, stop it, he’s not a girl. He won’t stop and Neil isn’t okay with it, it really sucks that he won’t use his name and pronouns. Like, come on.

Avery doesn’t recall a time when a teacher, vice principal, or principal stepped in or spoke up about a student being bullied or discriminated against. She listed examples, like when the student mentioned above was called faggot on a daily basis, when a friend came out as pansexual and was teased openly at school, or when someone called Avery a lesbian “very loudly” in class. Avery said that teachers need to do more than have a rainbow sticker on their door, and they need to do better at recognizing and respecting a student’s gender and sexual identity.

Some teachers, including substitute teachers, misgender people or use their dead name. It really depends on the teacher, but some will just refuse to use it. Some will make mistakes and misgender someone, and then fix it, maybe. But some don’t even try to fix it. For substitutes, I think it’s because of the attendance sheet, where the student’s given name is listed, and not their chosen name and preferred pronouns. Substitutes generally go by that attendance sheet.

\(^{18}\) Pseudonym for Avery’s friend
Teachers just don’t generally talk about gender and sexuality, ever. In family life class, I know someone in it, and they had some pretty out of date stuff on their worksheets, like the term “transsexual” and a question that became a joke, because there was a question that said, “What do you think it would be like to be gay?” and a gay student said, “I am gay.”

The sex education I received was some of the worst you could get. They just taught us about pimples and pubic hair and hair under your armpits and that’s it. I missed grade 8 and 9 because I was homeschooled, so I don’t know about those grades. It hasn’t been in my high school classes so far, though.

Avery learned about gender and sexuality outside of the classroom from a variety of sources. As mentioned, her understanding of sexuality primarily came from Charlotte, Steven, and the internet. Her understanding of gender identity, roles, and norms, however, came from her family and school experiences, as well as from being an athlete.

I haven’t thought a lot about my gender identity, like, at all. I mean, my mom and stuff has influenced me, and like, growing up in a farm family. I think I am pretty good about ignoring unfair gender norms and expectations, but I do see others affected around me. It used to affect me. I remember back in elementary school, some parents would have the whole class over, and I would feel so uncomfortable, like I was being suffocated when I was at those girls’ houses. Like, ah, I have to
conform... I just... can’t. Their attitudes. What if I did something wrong? They’d judge me. In elementary school, I did the opposite of what people expected, and people hated me for it. There was a lot of pressure to conform.

In high school, it’s okay here. Also, being a female athlete, I am lucky to see a lot of coaches who are women, but I am not seeing a lot of female athletes taking part. Being a girl in [this sport] is the same as being a guy in dance—it just opens the doors to more opportunities.

A recurring theme with Avery was that she would talk about her sexuality and gender identity to others if it was asked about, but generally did not give up this information easily due to seeing it as a normal thing and due to some fear of being targeted. She shared that she would be comfortable talking about it with people like her guidance counselors, teachers, and family doctor, but that she would never be the first to bring it up. In most encounters, Avery tries to normalize being queer. “In life, I’m just going with it. The fact that I’m queer is a part of me, but just a small part. It doesn’t define me. It’s important, but I am more than that.” Because Avery’s family and friends know about her sexual identity, she is not constantly having to divulge her identity and sexuality. It is a part of her that is accepted and very often normalized.

Instead, the contention that Avery faces most frequently is seeing LGBTQ students bullied at school without adults stepping in, including the time a student loudly called her a lesbian in class and the teacher didn’t step in. Avery argued that school staff need to bring more attention to gender and sexual diversity, in sexual health education and other courses,
so that it becomes a topic for open conversation and dialogue. Avery took part in the research project because she wanted to share her story and experiences to help facilitate this change. She said she wanted people to better understand and empathize with each other. “By taking part in this research, I want to help people in the future who might also be dealing with these sort of things, like understanding your sexuality or identity. This work can help everyone. This information will help everyone understand each other better.”

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As evidenced in the case studies presented above, key influences on how LGBTQ youth come to understand and accept their gender and sexual identities are family and friends. The youth in this study received and/or sought out information on sexuality and gender from the internet by performing searches online and using social media, by reading books or consuming media such as television and movies, and by learning about sex and sexuality at school, although this content was severely lacking. Participants had very different relationships with their parents and families, and this resulted in different levels of self-acceptance. Identity acceptance was also impacted by participants’ friend groups at school, as well as the level of bullying and victimization present. Overall, their day-to-day experiences were influenced by being LBGTQ in myriad ways, including but not limited to: the friendships they developed and maintained, the level and depth of communication with parents and family members about their identity, their mental health and self-acceptance, and their experiences navigating various structures, specifically the healthcare and education systems. Their individual experiences and understandings of their gender and sexual identities provide a rich look into how queer youth navigate the complex
process of identity development. In the following chapter, I will provide a discussion on the findings of this study, as well as reflect on limitations, recommendations, and future research.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

As you may recall from chapter one, my primary research question is, “How do sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth in Prince Edward Island understand their gender and sexual identities during mid-adolescence?” My secondary research question is, “How does identifying as an SGM youth impact their day-to-day experiences in their schools, communities, and families?” In chapter two, I presented literature in the area of identity development, specifically focusing on sexual and gender identity development and adolescence. In chapter three, I presented my research design and theoretical framework. In chapter four, I presented four cases to illustrate the day-to-day experiences of the youth who participated in this study, and to show how they have come to understand their identities over time. In this final chapter of my doctoral dissertation, I discuss the data within the context of the literature and wrap up the chapter with the research limitations, researcher reflections, challenges with ethics, research implications, recommendations, and future research directions.

Understanding Identity Development as a SGM Youth in PEI

The understanding of social identity development has changed over time. While it is possible that the current understandings of identity development work well for cisgender and heterosexual identifying people, stage models of identity development have been critiqued for application with sexual and gender minority individuals. In particular, they have been challenged due to the increasing importance placed on the impact of context and environment (Grace, 2015), intersectionality of identity categories (Crenshaw, 1991), the differences in stage-achievement according to factors like race, gender, and external support (Martos et al., 2015), the development of new terminology (White et al., 2018), and
a lack of agreement on definitions of sexual and gender identities (Stephens, 2018). Thus, I argue that the current models are not sufficient enough to explain the identity development process during adolescence for all sexual and gender minority youth.

Savin-Williams (2005) argued that stage models are not able to capture queer identity development, stating that the usefulness of the stage models are “compromised because they have proven to be incapable of adequately characterizing the dynamic lives of contemporary young people” (p. 81). Savin-Williams proposed an alternative model for understanding identity development for all adolescents, queer and heterosexual alike, called differential development trajectories. This models has four tenets: (a) all teenagers are influenced by biological, psychological, and social factors; (b) the development for same-sex attracted youth differs from heterosexual youth; (c) among same-sex attracted youth, developmental trajectories will differ, the same way that developmental trajectories will different for heterosexual youth; and, (d) no single person will have the same developmental trajectory as another person (p. 84).

Savin-Williams’ theory of differential development trajectories (2005) fits very well with the use of case studies as a research methodology as it allows for the researcher to describe participants’ identity trajectories in rich, in-depth narratives. There are many definitions of case studies as the field is heterogenous (Swanborn, 2010), but one definition is the study of a social phenomenon where “the researcher focuses on process-tracing: the description and explanation of social processes that unfold between persons participating in the process, people with their values, expectations, opinions, perceptions, resources, controversies, decisions, mutual relations and behavior” (p. 13). Inherent in this definition is the notion of development over time, and being able to collect data to show that progress.
In my study, the participants were going through identity development processes, as they were in mid-adolescence, with some retrospection into childhood and early adolescence. Savin-Williams’ model fits perfectly here, as youth were able to identify the influences on their identity development during a time when it is occurring, providing in-the-moment reflections and experiences. By using interviewing and journaling, I was able to capture some of this information, and was able to analyze the data and report it in case study format. By doing so, I seamlessly combined Savin-Williams’ model with my case study methodology.

In reviewing the four case studies presented in chapter four, Savin-William’s (2005) differential development trajectories model can be used to explain the differences in sexuality development for the four PEI youth. Without Savin-Williams stating it explicitly, this model aligns with queer theory in its debunking of stable sexes and sexualities (Jagose, 1996) and questioning what is “normal” and “deviant” (Namaste, 1994). The cases in chapter four show that there is no one way to experience identity development during adolescence. Savin-Williams (2005) argued, “The possibilities for divergent pathways are endless” (p. 89). As shown in the case studies, each participant articulates their identity differently. My participants exist in transitional identity periods. In queer theory, this is called liminality (Abes & Kasch, 2007). Liminality refers to a transitional period between identities, where “normalized definitions of either heterosexuality and nonheterosexuality” are rejected (p. 621). Liminality, simply put, is a state of becoming (ibid). In the following section, I situate the participants’ cases within the literature to show where their experiences diverge and converge with what is known in the field of identity development for queer youth.
Avery. Avery is a 16-year-old, pansexual cisgender teenager who uses she/her pronouns. According to Avery, she first discovered she might be something other than heterosexual sometime around the age of 13. Around this time she noticed that she was attracted to all genders, but did not have an understanding of what this might mean for her sexual identity. She had heard the term bisexual used in a movie, and with that information in mind, began exploring identity by using the internet and social media—tools commonly used by LGBTQ+ youth (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Manduley, Mertens, Plante, & Sultana, 2018; Park & Kwon, 2018). During our first interview, when Avery was speaking about her sexual identity, she told me she was bisexual or pansexual, and asked me, “What’s the difference?” Many non-heterosexual youth are confused when learning about bi- and pansexuality (Lapointe, 2017), and will often choose the label bisexual because most people understand what it means. Avery started off by exploring bisexuality, having heard the term before, and also sought out the expertise of her cousin, Charlotte, who identified as pansexual. Cousins, aunts, and uncles are the second most common group of family members (after parents) that youth speak to about sex and sexuality (Grossman, Richer, Charmaraman, Ceder, & Erkut, 2018). Youth often speak to family members about sex and sexuality because they want to learn from their experiences, and because it is easy to communicate with them. In speaking to Charlotte, Avery wanted to disclose her sexual identity and talk about it more with someone who would understand and have lived experience to share.

Avery also told her parents that she was pansexual, but this occurred after coming out to her cousin. According to young LGBTQ adults, coming out to parents is the most stressful disclosure they make because they risk losing the respect and affection of their
loved ones (Charbonnier, Dumas, Chesterman, & Graziani, 2018). When LGBTQ+ youth face parental rejection at home, they are also more likely to experience homelessness (Craig et al., 2014; Pope & Wayman, 2007). When Avery came out to her parents, she experienced acceptance from both her mother and father. Parental acceptance has been linked to a reduction in depressive symptoms and substance use for LGBT youth, and is linked to an increase in self-esteem (Pollitt et al., 2017; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010). Furthermore, having social supports—such as friends and family—can be a protective factor for sexual and gender minority youth (Williams, Mann, & Frederick, 2017). Having family support has been found to be the strongest predictor of LGBTQ adolescent and young adult long term adjustment (Hilton, 2014; Roe, 2017; Wells, 2012).

In terms of her mental health, Avery only remembers feeling prolonged stress once in her life when working in a toxic work environment. Otherwise, she said that since she is supported at home and is actively involved with sports, her mental health is good. It is possible that Avery’s social supports act as a buffer against mental illness.

Despite unconditional acceptance of her sexual identity at home and with family, Avery noted that her school has a long way to go in developing a positive climate that supports LGBTQ+ youth. Hilton (2014) summarized this dichotomy—supportive home environment and not too supportive school environment—in this statement, “gender and sexuality matter a lot in some PEI schools, [and] gender and sexuality do not matter in some PEI families and friendships” (p. 9). Avery argued that her school lacked three things: supportive educators, a school-based GSA, and inclusive curriculum. Avery was unsure if her school had policies and practices in place to keep LGBTQ+ students safe. When schools have known anti-homophobia policies, students are more likely to report
incidents of LGBTQ peer victimization (Peter, Taylor, & Campbell, 2016). Avery noted that there were teachers who exhibited or ignored homophobic or transphobic speech and actions (Sullivan et al., 2017), and that the sexual health curriculum failed to include LGBTQ+ students and topics (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Sadowski, 2008). Both of which can lead to an increase in bullying and victimization for queer youth (Gilbert, Fields, Mamo, & Lesko, 2018). Also, the principal denied the creation of a school-based GSA because it was perceived not to be necessary or needed. When schools have a GSA, queer students are less likely to drop out and are more likely to be aware of a safe adult in the school (Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). Students who attend schools with GSAs are also more likely to feel supported: “As a safe space, GSAs may be a valuable developmental context for LGBT students and allies to find resources and support that may be lacking in the overall school environment” (Calzo, Poteat, Yoshikawa, Russell, & Bogart, 2018, p. 2). By denying the creation of a GSA in Avery’s school, her principal lost an opportunity to have a safe space for queer students, and denied LGBTQ students the supports and resources they need to succeed.

In the literature, positive school climates for sexual and gender minority youth have four aspects: LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum, supportive teachers, policies and practices that support queer students and keep them safe, and school-based Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013). A positive school climate has many benefits for all students, and especially for sexual and gender minority students. A positive school climate is related to fewer instances of homophobic bullying and harassment, increased school connectedness, better academic outcomes, and better mental health outcomes (Birkett et al., 2009; Kosciw et al.,
To achieve a positive school climate, teachers and administrators play an important role (Hatchel, Valido, De Pedro, Huang, & Espelage, 2018; Sullivan et al., 2017; Tierney & Ward 2017; Wozolek et al., 2017). For example, the “number of supportive educators was one of the strongest predictors of a less hostile school climate and of greater self-esteem for LGBT students” (Kosciw et al., 2013, p. 58). It is those same supportive educators who often volunteer in school-based GSAs. If Avery’s school had a GSA, there could be some pretty significant positive impacts, such as sexual and gender minority youth feeling a greater sense of school connectedness and belonging (Greensmith & Davies, 2017), which has been linked to better mental health and wellbeing (Hatchel et al., 2018; Veale et al., 2015) and commitment to education and learning (Wilson, Asbridge, & Langille, 2018) among SGM students.

During our conversations, it was clear that Avery wanted to see inclusive curriculum being taught by her teachers. She spoke about times where teachers used outdated terminology that further marginalized LGBTQ+ students, and how the sexual health education curriculum had failed to provide her and her classmates with comprehensive education on health and sexuality. According to Avery, this failure of the sexual health curriculum (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Gilbert et al., 2018) was a missed opportunity for the school to educate students on the complexities of sexuality, and to promote acceptance and inclusivity. Because she and her classmates were not receiving an adequate sexual health education at school, Avery used the internet to access health and identity information, which is a common way for youth to access such information (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Manduley et al., 2018; Park & Kwon, 2018; Pérez-Torres, Pastor-Ruiz, & Ben-Boubaker, 2018). As such, the internet can be used to access health-
related information, and for youth to discover and learn more about identity construction and social identification. However, youth are still developing the digital literacy skills to navigate the plethora of information available online (Martin, 2017). In one study (Park & Kwon, 2018), almost half of the youth surveyed found online information to be confusing, a third found the lack of information available frustrating, and one in five were simply overwhelmed by the amount of information online. While it is crucial that youth can access health and sex related information online, educators and parents still play an important role in teaching digital literacy skills but also need to teach youth about such topics themselves, as parents and teachers are viewed as primary sources of sex and health information (Park & Kwon, 2018).

In Avery’s experience of familial acceptance of her queer identity and her few issues with her mental health, her focus turned outward to her school and the education happening within its walls. In her daily navigation of the school system, Avery has noticed where LGBTQ+ youth are slipping through the cracks. She has noticed when teachers have turned a blind eye to victimization, when they use outdated and harmful terminology, when they refuse to use a student’s chosen name and pronouns, and she has noticed the principals turning down a student’s request for a school-based gender and sexuality alliance. As “schools are microcosms of the communities and societies in which they exist,” (Sullivan et al., 2017, p. 291), Avery noticed the gap in education for herself and her peers, and the missed opportunity for the school to educate youth and provide them with the tools and information to become caring, accepting, inclusive, and healthy adolescents and young adults. As if often the case in schools, the “school culture assumes that everybody is heterosexual, [and] it validates heterosexuality. This bias conveys benefits
and privileges to some students at the expense of those who do not fall into that category” (Short, 2017, p. 3). Avery experienced this assumption when the principal denied a school-based GSA, and Avery said, “It would be weird if my school thought that there were no LGBTQ students in a school this big.” This assumption of heterosexuality contributes to the perpetuation of the heteronormative and cisnormative structures in schools (Perger, 2018) and creates an environment where LGBTQ+ youth may not feel respected, recognized, safe, or welcome (Birkett et al., 2009; Sullivan et al., 2017).

Queer theory questions the taken-for-granted assumptions around heterosexuality being the norm (Meyer, 2007), as noticed by Avery. By applying queer theory as a lens to understand the moment where Avery questioned her school’s decision to reject the creation of a GSA, I see Avery challenging the heterosexual hegemony (Namaste, 1994). Heterosexual hegemony, as outlined by Namaste (1994) is the dominance of one group over another—in this case, the dominance of heterosexuality over homosexuality. In Avery’s case study, by challenging heterosexual hegemony, Avery calls to attention the social construction of what is considered normal and deviant, and how societal systems, such as schools (Short, 2017), have come to privilege heterosexuality (Meyer, 2007). What Avery wanted most was to see change at her school and in schools in PEI, for schools to be more accepting and inclusive places, and for teachers to be inclusive in their teaching of students. In other words, she wanted to see the school system and educational practices queered.

Heterosexual hegemony is clearly a powerful force at Avery’s school. It is very possible that this invisible and unspoken assumption is responsible for the school’s lack of GSA, lack of inclusive curriculum, and lack of educator action when a student is being
victimized. Further, Avery’s confusion about the difference between bisexuality and pansexuality can be explained by her school’s lack of inclusive sexual health education; because her sexual education is limited and heterosexuality is the unchallenged norm at school (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Short, 2017), Avery was first only able to explore her identity online, without the proper language and understanding, and later, when hearing about bisexuality in a movie, was left to investigate whether this label fit. Without being taught anything definitive and inclusive about possibilities for sexual identities at school, Avery was left confused about the meaning of bisexuality and pansexuality, and ultimately was not sure which label was appropriate for herself.

**Finn.** Finn is a 16-year-old teenager and is indifferent to pronoun use. This means that in daily life, Finn is okay with people using he/him, she/her, and they/them pronouns when referring to them. However, Finn asked that I use they/them in my writing. Finn does not use definite labels when describing their sexual and gender identities. According to Finn, labels are too rigid and restrictive, and they choose not to use categories that might dictate their identity or behaviors, such as who they can or cannot date. Finn shared that when trying to explain their sexual and gender identities, they use reference points as starting points for understanding. For example, they said their gender identity falls somewhere around grey gender and their sexuality is somewhere around pansexual, asexual, or demisexual.

The use of reference points, or rather the dismissal of rigid labels, is explained by Savin-Williams (2005): “teenagers are increasingly redefining, reinterpreting, and renegotiating their sexuality such that possessing a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity is practically meaningless” (p. 1). Further, queer theory debunks stable identity categories,
and instead supports the idea of unstable identity positions (Jagose, 1996). By challenging binaries and the fixation on labels, Finn is putting queer theory into practice:

Yet another way to challenge a binary opposition is to expand the range of alternatives, trading duality for multiplicity. By challenging the binary in this manner, queer theory is capable of resisting essentialism while simultaneously affirming the experiences of people for whom the established categories are problematic, as well as people for whom the established categories are unproblematic. (Marinucci, 2016, p. 47).

For youth identifying under the asexual umbrella (ACE), sexuality is fluid, continually changing, with no end point (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2018). This understanding of sexuality is especially poignant for Finn, who does use asexuality as a reference point to understand their sexual identity. Despite identifying somewhere under the asexual umbrella, ACE youth like Finn still experienced relationships just on their own terms (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2018). Finn’s gender identity can be understood with the reference point of grey gender: someone feels they have a gender, but who has a weak sense of gender. How Finn understands grey gender and their own gender identity might differ from other youth (e.g., Stephens, 2018) who identify this way or somewhere near or around the gender non-conforming spectrum. Finn does not subscribe to any one idea of gender, and their gender expression can alternate between androgynous, masculine, and feminine.

Finn’s struggle with identity labels and categories reveals how the formation of gender and sexual identities is not the same for all adolescents. Finn’s struggle reveals how the linear stage models are not sufficient in describing the identity formation process for all SGM youth (Savin-Williams, 2005). Such models do not account for the complexity of
identity formation, they gloss over confusion and exploration, and focus on finding and accepting the ‘right’ identity label (Russell, Toomey, Ryan, & Diaz, 2014). The opposition of fixed identities and critique of stage and milestone models falls within a queer theoretical understanding of identity development (Alexander, 2018), and Finn’s experiences have put this theory into practice. Finn’s case study fully supports what Savin-Williams (2005) suggested as an alternative to linear models of identity development.

To gain a deeper understanding of gender and sexuality, Finn often viewed YouTube videos made by LGBTQ+ YouTubers like Ash Hardell (@AshHardell). For example, it was in a video by Ash Hardell that Finn first heard about the term ‘grey gender.’ For many youth, YouTube can be used as a way to learn more about gender and sexuality (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Pascoe, 2011). It can provide youth with role models that can influence their personal identity development (Craig et al., 2015). These “online sources of identities” provide LGBTQ+ youth with “expansive opportunities and freedoms for individuals with non-normative sexual and gender identities” to explore and learn (Mitchell & Hunnicutt, 2018, p. 15). In addition to YouTubers, Finn cited books and conversations with a friend as two other primary ways in which they learned about gender and sexuality. Finn recalled a time when the school librarian had a week-long display of books relating to sexuality. They also recalled multiple coffee shop conversations with their friend, jokingly calling the conversations therapy sessions, where they would discuss their developing understanding of gender and sexuality.

A gap present in Finn’s education about gender and sexuality has been their school’s lack of comprehensive and inclusive sexuality education. Finn and other LGBTQ+ youth consistently report that their sexual health education has silenced queer
voices and lived experiences and that it has failed them (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Flores et al., 2018; Gilbert et al., 2018). Finn argued that, as a whole, their teachers subscribe to oppressive heterosexual beliefs and assumptions, and that these teachers are in a school system with heterosexual and cisnormative structures (Perger, 2018; Peter et al., 2016; Short, 2017). Finn argued that all students need and deserve an inclusive education that includes LGBTQ+ topics, and that queer students in particular deserve more than a few mentions in curricular materials (Peter et al., 2016). Even when students mobilized to deal with cyberbullying at the school, this group resisted including anything queer due to being concerned that this topic was too sensitive and not age-appropriate for middle school students. In this way, heterosexual hegemony prevailed, and students were not able to challenge the ‘normalcy’ of heterosexuality and the ‘deviance’ of nonheterosexuality (Namaste, 1994).

While Finn’s school lacks a gender and sexuality alliance, inclusive educators, and comprehensive sexuality curriculum, they did note that two, in-school queer spaces existed: drama and music. Finn shared that the teachers for these classes were more inclusive than others, and that the students became somewhat like family. Sometimes, Finn would eat lunch in the music room and practice playing instruments with others. In one study, when youth indicated that there was inclusive instruction in music, drama, and art, these spaces were reported as being more significantly more supportive by LGBTQ students than heterosexual students. When courses like music, drama, and art had supportive curriculum, LGBTQ students reported these spaces to be safer and to have less bullying (Snapp, McGuire, Sinclair, Gabrion, & Russell, 2015). Drama has also been known to be a space where students can enact an assortment of gender practices (Pascoe, 2012), quite literally
queering gender and gender performance. Pascoe (2012) wrote, “Drama is notoriously a fag space in high schools” (p. 78). Drama is more than a space for gay male students, though. It can also be a space for social and educational change and a space to disrupt the hegemonic performance of gender and sexuality for all high school students (Wickett, 2012). In this case, drama can be used as a space to reflect on performativity, a tenet of queer theory. Performativity is the beliefs that our actions create our identities (Abes & Kasch, 2007). In drama, students can learn “how to perform gender and sexual identity and socially construct them into being through [their] behavior” (p. 21). For Finn, these spaces were safer for most students, and that the teachers would use students chosen names and pronouns readily. In being spaces that allowed for identity development, reconstruction, and resistance, drama and music became queer sites wherein students could challenge the taken for granted beliefs about gender and sexuality without penalization or fear of harassment.

Despite having a few safer and welcoming spaces at school, Finn felt a weak sense of school connectedness and belonging. Finn did not see themselves in the curriculum, felt as though the sexual health curriculum had failed queer youth, and their school did not have a GSA. All of these factors can contribute to a negative school climate for LGBTQ+ youth (Birkett et al., 2009; Hatchel et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2013; Sullivan et al., 2017). There are multiple possible impacts when LGBTQ+ youth feel a low sense of school connectedness and belonging, including poor mental health (e.g., depressive symptoms, suicidal ideations) and an increase in minority stress (Baams et al., 2018; Hatchel et al., 2018; Peter et al., 2016; Veale et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2018). Finn shared some mental health struggles, including stress, depressive symptoms, and poor coping mechanisms. If
LGBTQ+ students, like Finn, attend schools with inclusive curriculum, supportive educators, and GSAs, they can experience greater acceptance at school, greater self-esteem and mental health outcomes, and a greater commitment to education (Hatchel et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2018). Feeling a sense of school connectedness is important for Finn as they are not out at home and their closest friend does not attend their school.

**Isabelle.** Isabelle is a 17-year-old bisexual cisgender woman who uses she/her pronouns. She has been in the foster care system for most of her life, and has been living with a foster mom for several years. Isabelle is goal-orientated, self-sufficient, and determined to succeed. Isabelle has plans to apply for extended care\(^{19}\) and to attend postsecondary school, and has the support of both her social worker and foster mother. Although Isabelle was confused for many years about her sexual orientation, she has now come to understand that she is bisexual because she is attracted to both men and women. She looked back to early adolescence and remembered being more attracted to men, and her attraction to women was a “sliver.” Now, she says her attraction has changed and shifted, and she finds herself to be more attracted to women, but is still attracted to men. Isabelle explains that she sees attraction as fluid and changing, but knows that she will always be bisexual regardless of who she is dating. Isabelle does not subscribe to the binary view of bisexuality, where an individual is attracted to both men and women in binary terms; rather, Isabelle is attracted to all people regardless of gender identity and expression (Lapointe, 2017).

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\(^{19}\) In PEI, “a youth in permanent care and guardianship who turns 18 is attending an approved education, training, or rehabilitation program may continue to receive services to age 21” (Provincial Advocate for Children & Youth, 2012, p. 28).
Isabelle first noticed her attraction to men and women when she was around 13 years old. Isabelle was confused and was not sure what this meant for her sexuality and gender identity. Up until this point, the only knowledge Isabelle had about being LGBTQ, and more specifically being bisexual, was from movies and television shows, and Isabelle recalled two women with very different gender expression—one woman presented as stereotypically masculine and one presented as stereotypically feminine. This binary portrayal of same-sex couples in movies and television is not uncommon, where one partner is hypermasculine and the other hyperfeminine as it follows the masculine/feminine binary for romantic and sexual partnerships (Meyer, 2007). For Isabelle, these portrayals left her feeling confused about both her sexuality and gender expression, wondering whether if she found herself to be attracted to feminine women then she would have to become more masculine. For many bisexual and pansexual youth, this confusion around sexuality and sexual identity is common (Lapointe, 2017). Lapointe argued that because the sexual health education is often lacking LGBTQ voices and lived experiences, and that teachers often lack training for inclusive education, youth experiencing bi- and pansexuality are often confused about what this sexual orientation means. Youth often go online to learn more about this sexual identity because it is not covered in the curriculum or discussed by parents (Flores et al., 2018; Lapointe, 2017). Isabelle used the internet and social media (e.g., Instagram, Tumblr) to learn more about bisexuality (Craig et al., 2015; Park & Kwon, 2018; Pascoe, 2011) and spoke to a friend (Policarpo, 2017; Pollitt et al., 2017) who was bisexual, both primary sources of sexuality and sexual health information for LGBTQ youth.
Isabelle explored her sexuality for a few years, approximately between the ages of 13–14, before finally determining that she was bisexual. Isabelle has not publicly disclosed her sexual identity at school, and has only told close friends and her social worker. Her foster mother knows about Isabelle’s sexual identity because she saw private messages on Isabelle’s Facebook account and confronted her about it. Isabelle lost trust in her foster mother temporarily, but now considers her a trusted adult. Disclosing sexual identity to a parent is the most stressful disclosure an LGBTQ youth makes (Charbonnier et al., 2018) and it is often the case that sexual and gender minority youth conceal their identities due to anticipated stigma (Williams et al., 2017). Isabelle shared that she fears coming out at school because a pansexual friend experienced verbal harassment and victimization when they came out, and the adolescent boys received only a warning from the principal. In addition to the fear of harassment and bullying (Allen, 2017; Ash-Houchen & Lo, 2017; Mereish et al., 2017; Wozolek et al., 2017), Isabelle experiences biphobic prejudice (Lapointe, 2017) from her male peers at school. Isabelle recalls instances of male peers telling her she could not be bisexual, and that she had to pick a side: to be attracted to men or women. Isabelle does not experience this biphobia from any other peers or adults, in her recollection.

The biphobia that Isabelle experienced can be understood through the lens of queer theory. Heterosexuality is privileged in our North American society, but so are the binaries of man/woman, masculine/feminine, and gay/straight. To disrupt these binaries is to challenge the status quo, and many people find this uncomfortable. For those individuals pressuring Isabelle to pick a side, to be either attracted to men (thus, being heterosexual) or attracted to women (thus, being homosexual), having rigid binaries reinforces regulatory
constructs of gender and sexuality (Meyer, 2007). Queer theory attempts to challenge these traditional understandings of sexualities and gender identities, to avoid binary contrasts, and to debunk the notion of stable sexes, genders, and sexualities (Jagose, 1996; Marinucci, 2016; Meyer, 2007).

At her school, Isabelle expressed frustration with teachers turning a blind eye to homophobic and transphobic harassment and bullying, and noticed several teachers not using a trans youth’s chosen name or pronouns (Sullivan et al., 2017). Isabelle expressed frustrations over the school, the structural stigma (Sitkin & Murota, 2017), and negative school climate (Birkett et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2013; Peter et al., 2016). In schools with negative climates, LGBTQ students often feel unsafe and experience harassment, and their experiences are often silenced in the curriculum (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Gilbert et al., 2018). It is in such climates that LGBTQ students experience greater barriers and challenges to academic success and personal wellbeing. It is in climates like this where Isabelle and other sexual and gender minority youth experience or are fearful of harassment and victimization, where they may not see themselves in the curriculum, and where bullying students only receive a warning.

For as long as Isabelle could remember, she has suffered from anxiety and other mental health issues. The primary ways in which Isabelle coped with anxiety was smoking cigarettes, and only after admitting herself into a psychiatric unit at the hospital did she start seeing a psychologist and psychiatrist regularly. When reflecting on her mental health experiences, Isabelle recalled having a particularly negative experience with the intake nurse and hospital staff during her stay. When LGBTQ adolescents and adults disclose their sexual and gender identities to hospital staff and healthcare professionals, they can
experience a wide range of reactions, including discrimination and disbelief to identity affirmation and respect (Rossman, Salamanca, & Macapagal, 2017). Due to fear of negative reactions, more than one-third of LGBTQ adults avoid disclosing and only 35% of LGBTQ adolescents disclose to healthcare providers, and this percentage is even lower for bisexual youth (Rossman et al., 2017).

When Isabelle arrived to the hospital seeking psychiatric care and admittance into the psychiatric wing, her intake nurse asked if she had a boyfriend that she could contact. This is a clear example of normative heterosexual beliefs at work. The intake nurse had assumptions about Isabelle before even having a conversation about partners. Isabelle said she had a girlfriend, and the intake nurse quickly changed the subject and did not offer to contact Isabelle’s girlfriend. Rossman, Salamanca, and Macapagal (2017) argued that many healthcare providers work within a hospital with structural stigma (Sitkin & Murota, 2017), where staff hold beliefs, like assuming all patients are heterosexual, that can negatively impact the treatment and wellbeing of vulnerable groups, such as sexual and gender minority youth. It is often the case that healthcare providers and staff lack a general knowledge of LGBTQ+ issues and patients’ needs (Rossman et al., 2017). During her stay in the hospital, Isabelle only got to speak to a psychiatrist once, and only for 30 minutes where they diagnosed Isabelle with an anxiety disorder. This would be the only benefit of Isabelle’s stay, as it impacted her psychological care post-release from the hospital.

After being released from the hospital, Isabelle began seeing a psychologist in-person and a psychiatrist via teleconference on a regular basis to get her mental health in order, and specifically looked for ways to cope with and manage her anxiety. In addition to mental health supports, Isabelle also has strong, trusting relationships with her foster mom,
social worker, boyfriend, and many friends at school. Having multiple social supports and family acceptance are protective factors against mental illness and minority stress and having social supports is a predictor of academic success (Roe, 2017; Ryan et al., 2010; Sullivan et al., 2017). As long as Isabelle has these support networks in place, and her mental health and wellbeing can be prioritized, she is determined to move into independent living in an extended care home, and to begin postsecondary education after graduation.

**Mikey.** Mikey is a 16-year-old, pansexual/polysexual, transmasculine teenager who uses both they/them and he/him pronouns. According to Mikey, they don’t really pay attention to gender, rather they find themselves attracted to personality. Mikey shared that being out in the world as a queer person has helped them become more aware of their developing sexual and gender identity. In time, they have discovered that their attractions lean more toward women. They also experience gender dysphoria and mental illness, and this leads to unhealthy coping mechanisms. There are several factors that have enabled Mikey’s exploration of their identity—the internet, friends, and their supportive aunt. Unfortunately, Mikey has also experienced individuals who do not provide support or understanding: mainly their parents and their prior Christian counselor. Currently, Mikey has distanced themselves from these negative factors, and now resides with their aunt on a permanent basis. They await hormone replacement therapy and feel cautiously positive about their future.

One major aspect of Mikey’s identity development and self-acceptance was their relationship to their parents. Parental acceptance is a predictor of reduced depressive symptoms, and parental rejection is a predictor of suicidal ideations and behaviors, substance use, anxiety and depression (Catalpa & McGuire, 2018; Roe, 2017; Ryan et al.,
Mikey’s parents hold very rigid beliefs about gender, fully supporting the binary way of thinking about gender (man/woman). Mikey experienced parental rejection and disownment when they disclosed their gender identity. It is possible that religious beliefs mediated Mikey’s parents’ reactions (Roe, 2017). For trans youth who come out to their parents, 43% experience family breaks, 29% get kicked out, and 20% choose to leave their family home (Catalpa & McGuire, 2018). Mikey’s decision to leave home was directly due to parental rejection of their identity and fear for their safety and wellbeing had they stayed. In this way, Mikey existed in a conditional family, “wherein certain terms or conditions related to gender and sexuality had to be met for the youth to be a part of the family” (Robinson, 2018, p. 5). Like Mikey’s family, families in the Robinson (2018) study held religious beliefs and ideologies that were negative toward LGBTQ people, and these families often tried to police gendered behavior and identities. When Mikey revealed their gender identity to their parents, which is the most stressful disclosure for trans youth to make (Charbonnier et al., 2018), this challenged their parents’ unconditional love and acceptance. Mikey’s gender identity also challenged the rigid gender beliefs held by their parents, where anything other than cisgender male and cisgender female identities were considered “deviant” (Namaste, 1994). By coming out to their parents, Mikey had a lot at stake. They could lose the respect and affection of their parents, and could also put their own wellbeing at risk (Charbonnier et al., 2018). “A family’s negative reaction to certain types of sexual identities and behaviors complicates or challenges some families’ unconditional love of their child” (Robinson, 2018, p. 6). Mikey’s parents grieved the loss of the child they thought they knew, which is common for parents facing an identity disclosure (Schimmel-Bristow et al., 2018), but they could not support Mikey’s identity,
refused to use their name and pronouns, and withheld emotional support from Mikey. As a result, and after some time remaining at home without emotional support (McGuire, Mahan, Lacey, & Hoelscher, 2017), Mikey decided to leave home to live with their aunt.

Another aspect that mediated Mikey’s identity development and understanding of their transmasculine identity was their struggles with gender dysphoria, which is the “incongruence between the expressed or experienced gender and the biological sex at birth” (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018, p. 31). It is not a far stretch to argue that gender dysphoria is linked to the rigid binaries that exist, like man/woman, masculine/feminine, and gay/straight. As a transmasculine person, Mikey is actively challenging the understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman. By occupying this identity, Mikey is deconstructing gendered identity categories and the language that supports them (Meyer, 2007). When Mikey said, “My name is Mikey. I am a transmasculine identifying person. My pronouns are he and they and I am valid. I am worth it,” they were vocally challenging the narrative around what is considered “deviant” and “normal” (Namaste, 1994). As Marinucci (2016) wrote, “another way to challenge a binary opposition is to expand the range of alternatives, trading duality for multiplicity” (p. 36). In this way, Mikey is making room for more understandings of gender identity that go beyond the traditional binary of man/woman.

Youth, like Mikey, who do not experience gender typicality—fitting with one’s gender assigned at birth—often experience lower self-worth and greater mental health issues (Smith & Juvonen, 2017). For trans youth experiencing dysphoria, the most common mental health issues that can arise are depression and anxiety. Mikey experienced depression and dealt with it in a variety of ways, from substance use (alcohol), self-harm,
and seeing a counsellor. Unfortunately for Mikey, their therapist lacked knowledge about trans identities and lacked empathy. This is not an uncommon reaction from medical providers working with transgender individuals. Reactions from mental health and medical providers can range anywhere between supportive to not being willing to work with trans individuals, and anywhere in between (Schimmel-Bristow et al., 2018). Mikey attempted other coping mechanisms when counselling was not efficient or helpful. Alcohol is a common coping mechanism for sexual and gender minority youth dealing with mental health issues, and is often concurrent with self-harm behaviors (Taliaferro, McMorris, Rider, & Eisenberg, 2018). In this study, the researchers found that for self-harming youth, they were more likely than their non-self-harming peers to experience mental health problems, running away, and substance abuse (Taliaferro et al., 2018). However, when family, community, school, and medical supports are in place for trans youth, they can experience similar mental health outcomes as their heterosexual counterparts (McGuire et al., 2017).

While Mikey did not disclose any current suicidal ideations, according to the literature, they are at risk for suicide based on their identity. Youth who identify as sexual and gender minorities are eight times more likely to experience suicide (Sitkin & Murota, 2017), and a third of trans youth in Canada have attempted suicide in the last year (Veale et al., 2015). Youth who experience greater parental rejection, homelessness, and mental health issues are more likely to self-harm and to have suicidal ideations (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018; McGuire et al., 2017; Sitkin & Murota, 2017; Taliaferro et al., 2018). Mikey does have a strong support system in their aunt. Their aunt supports their identity
unconditionally, and meets Mikey’s needs. Because of this, and Mikey being on track to receive hormone replacement therapy, their identity is being reaffirmed for the time being.

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Avery, Finn, Isabelle, and Mikey’s stories highlight various issues present in the school system, including the lack of (a) inclusive curriculum, (b) comprehensive sexual health programs, (c) supportive educators who step in and step up, and (d) gender and sexuality alliances. Their stories show that, when facing a lack of quality sexuality education, they turn to the internet and social media to find information about identity formation and development. Their stories show the support and acceptance, but also the rejection and intolerance, they can experience by their peers, friends, families, and guardians. Additionally, SGM youth are also putting queer theory into action in their daily lives, and using it as a lens to understand their experiences, such as when Isabelle questioned her intake nurse, or when Finn decided to use reference points instead of labels.

It should be noted that in the only other study about LGBTQ+ youth in PEI, a thesis written by Thomas Hilton (2014), the two queer participants advocated for similar changes to the Prince Edward Island educational landscape. Specifically, Hilton outlined protective factors for queer youth in PEI schools such as “teachers who intervene when witness to homophobic behaviours; anti-discrimination policies which include sexual orientation that are known by students; school-based Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs); and, supportive relationships with families and friends” (p. 91). In considering the findings from my current research, it appears as though many of these recommendations have not been implemented in PEI schools.
It is also important to note that the case studies in this dissertation were created from data that were not retrospective. Unlike most research on queer identity, the data in this study came from youth under the age of 18. The youth who participated in this study were still adolescents undergoing development and trying to understand their identities.

The findings also reveal that identity formation and development is not always a linear process, easily fitting into the traditional milestone models. In reality, the identity formation process for queer youth is complex, and sometimes there is no real end-point where identity labels are settled upon. The case studies support the identity trajectories model proposed by Savin-Williams (2005), wherein all youth experience identity development differently, and where sexual and gender minority youth experience identity development differently than their heterosexual peers. The case studies show that sexual and gender minority youth have differential development trajectories, that no two youth experience the same developmental trajectory, and that development continues through space and time. Thus, a major finding from this research is that Savin-William’s (2005) theorizing of differential development trajectories is supported. While these findings are important and influential, I must also share the limitations and ethical challenges I faced in conducting this research.

Limitations

In all research studies, there will be methodological and researcher limitations. Limitations are possible study weaknesses, usually out of the researcher’s control, that can impact the quality of the findings and the ability of a researcher to answer the research questions. In the present study, there are several limitations worth mentioning. First, case study methodologies often rely on multiple data collection methods, typically participant
observation and interviewing. In seeking SGM youth to participate and asking that they
describe their sexual and gender minority identities, data collection through self-reported
methods (interviews, journaling) was the only appropriate option for my research questions
and methodology—I could not take part in participant observation for this study. Second,
there may be limited transferability of the results due to the data being collected from only
four participants, who all identified as White and were assigned female at birth (afab), from
one small Canadian province. It would not be advisable to transfer these findings to youth
who identify as racial or ethnic minorities, for example, or to those who are growing up in
a large urban environment. Third, I must consider the “fragility” of the data (Savin-
Williams, 2005). That is, because youth are actively deconstructing and reconstructing
understandings of gender and sexuality, the data may be “old news” to the individuals in a
few short years (p. 14). That said, I do not think the methodological limitations negatively
impacted the quality of the findings nor my ability to answer my two research questions.

The researcher limitations in this study were the challenges I faced in accessing a
vulnerable and fairly hidden population (i.e., SGM youth) and the time frame of the study.
I sought to understand how sexual and gender minority youth understood their gender and
sexuality identities during mid-adolescence, and how these identities impacted their daily
experiences. Participants were aged 15–17 when data collection began (February, 2018),
and were aged 16–17 when data collection ended (May, 2018). Data were collected over
four months. As the research literature shows, gender and sexual identity development
occurs for a long period of time, well before adolescence and well into adulthood. As a
doctoral student on a tight funding timeline, I was not able to collect data longitudinally.
This may be a limitation in my study that can be ameliorated in future adolescent identity
studies, where data can be collected over longer periods of time to capture the changes that occur in identity formation and development.

The second researcher limitation that I would like to speak to was the challenge in accessing my participants—sexual and gender minority youth in PEI. In developing my research proposal for this study, I researched the ethics of doing research with adolescent SGM youth and found that for many researchers, it can be challenging doing research with SGM youth because they may be reluctant to take part if the research requires parental consent and they have not self-identified openly to their parents and family (Fisher & Mustanski, 2014). I sought expert opinions and information, and found that the TCPS 2 did not specify age of consent for research, but instead looked at capacity to provide consent. I looked into age of consent in PEI. In PEI, when you are 16, you may consent to medical decisions, leave school, and get married (Community Legal Information Association of PEI, 2009). After completing my proposal and getting permission to move onto my research study, I applied for ethics approval from my institution. Based on my research into doing research with SGM youth and the sensitive nature of the data being collected, I decided to argue for waiving of parental consent for youth aged 16 and older, as other researchers before me have succeeded in doing so (e.g., Mustanski, 2011; Ross et al., 2014). I submitted my application for ethics approval on November 29, 2017. On December 15, 2017, I received an email that outlined the changes that I would have to make to receive ethics approval. It was in this email that I found out that the ethics review board had sought out legal advice on my application, and that it was determined that I required parental consent for youth under the age of 18.
I had to make a decision: whether I would accept this review and proceed with the changes, or make a second attempt at an ethics application where a parental waiver was sought. After consulting with my supervisor, I decided to undertake the latter. I read more about researchers’ experiences with gaining a waiver of parental consent when SGM youth were the study population. Mayo (2017) argued that oftentimes SGM youth are not considered mature enough to make this decision on their own. SGM youth also feel frustrated by this belief, as ethics protocols don’t recognize their agency (Gilbert et al., 2018). Mustanski (2011) argued that ethics review boards requiring parental consent are not thinking about the safety of the participants who may be outed by taking part. On December 28, 2017, I resubmitted my applications for ethics with the following argument:

I respectfully disagree with this suggested revision. I worry that in consulting the UPEI legal team, the REB is concerned with protecting the institution rather than the participants in this study. Specifically, I disagree with the decision that age of majority in PEI (18) must be used for consent in this research. It is well documented that requiring parental consent for LGBTQ youth can be harmful (e.g., de Montigny & Podmore, 2014; Fisher & Mustanski, 2014; Lucassen, Fleming, & Merry, 2017; Mustanski, 2011; Ross et al., 2014). In requiring parental consent for LGBTQ youth, especially those with the capacity to understand and appreciate the research and risks associated with participating, the researcher may be putting those participants at risk if they are not “out” to their parents, guardians, or families.
In Canada, “there is no fixed age when young people are deemed of providing consent to participate in research” (McGinn, 2015, p. 160). In Prince Edward Island, “there is no legal ‘age of consent’”; instead, “PEI Law provides that a minor may give valid consent if he/she is capable of appreciating fully the nature and consequences” (Prince Edward Island Research Ethics Board, 2014, p. 6). The PEI Research Ethics Board also follows the Tri-Council Policy Statement (Government of Prince Edward Island, 2016). The TCPS 2 does not specify age of consent for research, but instead looks at capacity to provide consent. In my application, it is argued that participants 16 and older are capable of understanding the research requirements, as well as the risks and benefits of participation, and are capable of consenting. That is, they are able to give informed consent.

The research as proposed is not more than minimal risk, and requiring parental consent may adversely impact the safety of LGBTQ youth. Requiring parental consent in this research may result in the difficulty (or impossibility) of recruiting LGBTQ youth in the study. Not only is this research minimal risk, there are also benefits, as outlined by Lucassen, Fleming, and Merry (2017), such that LGBTQ participants (aged 13 to 19) reported to have received benefits from participating in the research, such as being able to talk through issues, and knowing you can help others by participating in the research. The youth participants also noted that requiring parental consent would be a barrier because some are not “out” with their parents, families, and peers.
In conclusion, I have not amended my application to reflect the suggested change. Instead, I ask that participants aged 16 and older be able to consent to the research as outlined.

On January 11, 2018, after the UPEI Research Ethics Board reviewed my updated submission, including my letter, and after they consulted with the Secretariat on Responsible Conduct of Research, they agreed with my argument that parental consent could be waived, and extended this to youth aged 14 and older, as I was seeking participants aged 14 to 18. After making a few small changes, I received my certificate of REB approval on January 16, 2018. In including all of these details in my dissertation, it is my hope that other researchers can learn from my experience.

**Researcher Reflections**

Revisiting queer theory. As a researcher, it became evident that I was not only using queer theory as a lens to understand identity development and the experiences of SGM youth, but that my participants were actively deconstructing and disrupting norms, challenging heterosexism, and rejecting cissexism and destabilizing identity categories (Browne & Nash, 2010; Greensmith & Davies, 2017; Jagose, 1996; Mayo, 2017). They often challenged what was “normal” and “abnormal” (Namaste, 1994; Stephens, 2018) and were aware of the contextual and generational setting they were present in, and how that impacts identity development (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Mayo, 2017).

It was fascinating to see this happening before my eyes. I realized that queer theory was more than a theoretical lens for my study; it was also a lens being utilized by my
participants to help them understand their identity development, their experiences, and their place in the world. For example, participants refused to allow heterosexuality to be the benchmark by which all identity is compared—one of the assumptions of queer theory (Snorton, 2016; Wells, 2011). By getting to know their experiences and finding out more about their lives, it is very apparent that queer studies is not a homogenous project, that in fact “there is no monolithic gay experience” (Guittar, 2017, p. 17). This is because their identities are unique, changing, fluid, and are always in a state of becoming (Browne & Nash, 2010; Meyer & Northridge, 2007; Taylor, 2010; Wells, 2011). Their identities were also being shaped by other identity factors in extremely complex and nuanced ways (Browne & Nash, 2010; Lambert, 2016). In sum, it is very clear that queer theory fits the research topic, and it was being utilized both by the researcher and participants alike.

**Dealing with emotion.** “Nothing that I read in planning this study prepared me for the emotionality of the research process” (Rowling, 1999, p. 175, as cited by McClelland, 2017, p. 340). During the data collection phase of this dissertation research, I soon realized how true these words were. I had read all about the identity formation processes for sexual and gender minority youth and the challenges they often face in their daily lives. I also had my own well of experience to draw from, having been an SGM youth and now an SGM adult. What I was not prepared for was the emotion and rapport that would develop over four months of interviewing four SGM youth. I listened intently during interviews that often included upsetting, and sometimes triggering, topics and recollections of events (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018; McClelland, 2017). I once had an interview that ended with me crying in a public washroom after the participant and I wrapped up the conversation. I called a friend and just cried on the phone, explaining that I was upset and felt helpless. I
also journaled in my reflexive researcher journal, and spoke to my supervisor about it. Other interviews may not have evoked a full-on breakdown in a public washroom, but interviewing youth about gender and sexuality did evoke emotional reactions and sense of empathy and care for them as people (Ross, 2017).

Emotional topics came up during interviews, and I experienced them again when I listened to the audio files, transcribed the materials, reviewed the typed documents, analyzed the data, and wrote the case studies (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018). I was “bearing witness” to my participants’ experiences of confusion, oppression, and rejection over and over (Fine, 2006). Looking back, I am not sure I could have better prepared for this experience. I knew going into the research that the topic was sensitive and that oftentimes sexual and gender minority youth experience challenges in their lives. I knew that as a qualitative researcher I was the research tool (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018), I was the instrument used to collect data, and I could not turn off my emotional responses. I made sure to engage in self-care behaviors like reflexive journaling, talking to my peers and supervisor, and engaging in relaxation techniques. Now, with the journey complete, I am the keeper of many stories and I feel capable of holding them.

**A missing topic: The impact of rurality.** The participants in my study lived in rural and urban areas in Prince Edward Island, with two living in urban areas and two in rural areas of the province. When reviewing the data prior to writing the case studies, I noticed that no one mentioned the influence of place on their identity development. There were opportunities for participants to comment on rurality or urbanicity in the interviews, as I had asked questions about community involvement, volunteerism, and employment. I had some assumptions that the impact of place may come up during interviews. In finding
none, I searched for literature in relation to the impact of rurality in Prince Edward Island and queer identities and found one reference. I discovered a short statement in a master’s thesis from my own Faculty of Education, written by Thomas Hilton, where a participant named Ryan noted that most people did not have a problem with him being gay, but figured that people “further out in the country” would (Hilton, 2014, p. 10). I also found a chapter written by Baker (2016), who investigated the impact of rurality on LGBT identities in Nova Scotia, a short ferry ride away from the Island. In this work, Baker stated that in previous literature, it was noted that LGBT people who lived rural places were often subjected to isolation, prejudice, and violence. However, Baker’s participants’ experiences contradicted this literature, and in fact, “rural areas provided [the] participants with varying levels of tolerance and acceptance” (p. 32). Additionally, Baker’s participants faced most experiences of harassment and homophobia within school walls. Interestingly, participants in Baker’s study noted that the internet played a role in reducing the sense of isolation, and going online allowed them to access information and connect via social media networks. All of my own participants noted the powerful roles that the internet and social media played in their exploration of their queer identities. It is possible that the internet reduced any sense of isolation that my own participants felt. I say it is possible because I did not ask directly about isolation; I asked about their use of the internet and how they used it to explore identities and otherwise.

It is worthwhile to note that Baker’s (2016) study took place in a fairly rural Canadian province, with nearly 75% of the population living in rural areas. As such, the divide between rural/urban experiences may not be so vast. Similarly, Prince Edward Island is considered to be almost entirely rural. It is a province with no metropolis and
with only two large, ‘urbanized’ municipalities, Charlottetown and Summerside, which make up only 35% of the Island’s population (Randall, Desserud, & MacDonald, 2015; Statistics Canada, 2016). Thus, is it quite possible that participants in my dissertation study were not aware of the impacts of rurality and urbanicity. Unfortunately, as I did not ask this question directly, I cannot say for certain.

**Implications and Recommendations**

There are several recommendations and implications for education and research based on the results of this study. Based on the experiences shared by the four participants, I plan to disseminate the findings widely among Prince Edward Island school staff and administrators so that they may look at their policies and practices to ensure that there are policies that support LGBTQ+ students and that these policies are known, and that all schools have gender and sexuality alliances because they can improve school climate. As for implications, researchers like Budge et al. (2018), Schmitz and Tyler (2018), Wagaman (2016), and others have been calling for the inclusion of SGM youth voices in research. This study presents the experiences and current identity understandings of four SGM youth in PEI who are under the age of 18, whereas many studies on LGBTQ+ identity development have focused on retrospective accounts by adults aged 18 and older. The participants in this study were midway through adolescence. The findings from this study add something unique to the current literature on youth identity development. It is possible that the findings from this study can provide Island educators, mental health and healthcare providers, and LGBTQ+ organizations with local, current, and in-depth data on the daily

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20 Under the age of 18.
experiences of SGM youth in our province, how they come to understand their identities, the hardships they navigate, and the challenges that they overcome in doing so.

As for recommendations, it is my hope that the findings from this study will influence pre-service education programs, such as the Bachelor of Education program at UPEI, and in-service teachers’ practice in the classroom, specifically in showing them how they can support and stand up for LGBTQ+ youth in schools. The four participants shared moments where teachers didn’t step up and step in for sexual and gender minority youth experiencing bullying or marginalization. Specifically, my first recommendation is that I would like to see a course created at UPEI in the Bachelor of Education program in the area of educating and supporting marginalized students, like sexual and gender minority youth. Currently, I have begun to share my findings in workshops and presentations for pre-service and in-service teachers. I also took part in a consultation on the new sexual health curriculum being developed in Prince Edward Island.

My second recommendation is to the PEI Department of Education, Early Learning and Culture. I would like to see a commitment to provide island teachers, school staff, and support workers with professional development in the area of supporting sexual and gender minority youth in PEI. My third recommendation comes from the stories shared by my participants about navigating the healthcare system in PEI. I would like to see the Faculty of Nursing at UPEI, Health PEI, Public Health Nursing, and the PEI Department of Health and Wellness work collaboratively to determine gaps in training and education in the area of how LGBTQ+ patients are treated in the healthcare system, and commit to ameliorating those gaps.
Future Research

More research in this area is still needed. My study only provides the experiences and understandings of four SGM island youth. Future research is needed in understanding more deeply how sexual and gender minority youth learn about LGBTQ+ identities, whether it be online, in school, with friends and peers, or with parents and family members. Specifically, what information about LGBTQ+ identities are they receiving at school, where are the gaps in this education, and how are they filling this gap? Another area of future research is understanding the role that school climate, school belongingness, and school connectedness play for SGM youth in PEI. In the literature, these concepts are earmarked as important and influencing factors on SGM youth mental health, wellbeing, and academic success. This would be an area I would like to explore in future research studies. A last area of research needing further work is understanding the role of parents and family for SGM youth in PEI. The youth in my study came from a variety of homes, and they experienced a wide range of acceptance and rejection. Greater, in-depth research could delve deeper into the role of families in SGM youth’s lives in Prince Edward Island, and these findings could better assist educators and healthcare providers with information about home-life for LGBTQ+ youth.

Conclusion

In September, 2015 I set out to complete my doctoral dissertation at the University of Prince Edward Island in the Faculty of Education. I set out to answer two research questions, “How do sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth in Prince Edward Island understand their gender and sexual identities during mid-adolescence?” and, “How does identifying as an SGM youth impact their day-to-day experiences in their schools,
communities, and families?” I performed a qualitative case study using two data collection methods, interviews and journaling, to find out more about four SGM youth: Avery, Finn, Isabelle, and Mikey. The participant case studies in chapter four present the lived experiences and understandings of youth coming to understand their sexual and gender identities. The cases show the queer identity formation, exploration, and development during mid-adolescence for four Island youth. The participants’ stories show the impact that their identities have had on their family relationships, their schooling experiences, their mental health, and for some, the navigation of the healthcare system. Unlike most studies on LGBTQ-identifying people that are retrospective, in this study I engaged with participants who are adolescents presently undergoing identity formation and trying to understand their SGM identities.

In sum, the case studies show how four youth—Avery, Finn, Isabelle, and Mikey—navigated and continue to navigate life, and negotiated and re-negotiated their identities. It is now my responsibility and duty to share these findings to stakeholders who can make a difference for children and adolescents, for those feeling confused and othered about their sexual and gender identities. Thank you, Avery, Finn, Isabelle, and Mikey for trusting me with your stories.
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Appendix A: Interview Questions for Youth Participants

Before we begin, can you tell me a little about yourself?

1. Do you have preferred pronouns? (For example, I use she/her.)

2. Can you tell me how do you understand your:
   a. Gender identity?
   b. Expression?
   c. Sexuality? (Sexual Orientation)
   d. Sexual and/or romantic attractions?

3. Are you out to your friends? At school? At home? Online?

4. Other intersections: Do you identify as a racial or ethnic minority? Disability? Socioeconomic status?

5. Can you tell me about your family?

6. Can you tell me about your friendships at school? Online?

7. When did you first know that you might identify as [______]?

8. How have you come to understand who you are?

9. What life events do you think had a major impact on your gender identity? On your sexual identity?

10. How has being an SGM youth in PEI impacted your day-to-day experiences in your school? Classroom? Peer group? Family? Church? Relationships?

11. How has being an SGM youth in PEI impacted your day-to-day experiences in your community?

12. How has being an SGM youth in PEI impacted your experiences with your family?

13. How has being an SGM youth in PEI impacted your experiences with your friends?
14. What resources have helped you learn more about sexual and gender identity?

15. Do you have any role models that have helped you understand your identity?

16. Can you tell me about any supports you have in your life?
   
a. Do you belong to any in person LBGTQ communities?
      
i. Can you tell me about your sense of belonging here?
   
b. Do you belong to any online communities related to LGBTQ/SGM?
      
i. Can you tell me about your sense of belonging here?

17. Can you describe a positive experience you’ve had in dealing with your SGM identity? Have you had any negative experiences?

18. Have you experienced any type of discrimination?
   
a. Have you experienced any homophobia?
   
b. Prompt for both questions: How did you deal with [the experience].

19. Do you ever feel stressed about your identity? Can you tell me why or why not?
   
a. What sorts of things do you do to help with stress (if they share anything about minority stress)?

20. Is there a Gay Straight Alliance at your school? Are you involved?

21. Do you take part in any advocacy initiatives? At school? In your community?
   
a. What motivates you to take part?

Do you have anything to add?
Appendix B: Information Letter for Youth Participants

I invite you to participate in a research project called, “Exploring Sexual and Gender Minority Youth Identities in Prince Edward Island.” To make an informed decision about whether you want to take part in this study, please read this letter carefully. This letter is a part of the informed consent process.

The Research Project

My name is Brittany Jakubiec and I am a PhD student at the University of Prince Edward Island. In this study, I am looking to understand how sexual and gender minority and LGBTQ youth understand their identities.

To answer this question, I will interview 8 young people in PEI. I will interview each youth 3 times, and you will keep a journal for 2 weeks. In this journal, you might reflect on your identity and your experiences, and answer questions like “How do I identify?” or “How have I come to understand my sexual and gender identity?” After our first interview, you will keep a journal for 14 days. You will bring the journal with you to our second interview.

What You Will Do, Where it Takes Place, and How Much Time it Takes

I will interview each participant three times at different points in my research. Interviews will take place in a public location agreed upon by us both. You do not need to prepare for the interviews in any way. The length of each interview will be about 60 minutes. Journaling time is flexible. You may write for as long as you wish, as long as you write on a daily basis for two weeks (14 days).

I Want to Withdraw. How?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Otherwise said, it is up to you whether you want to participate. If you decide you want to participate, but later decide you longer want to be a part of the study, you may withdraw from the study up until 3 weeks after our last interview together. Up until then, you will be able to remove yourself from the study. I will retain the data that I gathered from participants who choose to withdraw; participants will be given a final opportunity to correct and/or redact any information from the transcripts and/or journal.

Possible Risks and Benefits

Because I am recruiting youth aged 14–18 years old, it is important that your safety comes first. Speaking about your sexual and gender identities might bring up feelings and thoughts that you want to speak to someone about. I will go over a list of resources that you can access, and I will provide you with a handout with this information.
One possible benefit from taking part in this study is having your (anonymous) story heard, and the potential for your experiences to be shared with others. Participants in other research projects have said that taking part in research allowed them to work through ideas and issues, and they also felt good about possibly helping others by participating.

Confidentiality and Storage of Data

Each interview audio recording will be transcribed into a text file that you will be able to review. The text files (i.e., transcripts) and the journal you keep will not be available to anyone other than myself and my supervisor, Dr. Goddard. I will keep all data in a locked cabinet and will destroy all data after five (5) years. In the transcripts and journal entries, I will delete any real names, and you and anyone you mention will be given a made-up name (i.e., pseudonym). You may choose your own pseudonym. In all reports, articles, and presentations, your name and personal information that might identify you will not be used. In other words, specific details that might allow a reader to figure out your identity will not be used when I report my findings. It is important to note that the information you provide for this study will be confidential, with the exception of the limits of the law. That means in the unlikely event that abuse is disclosed to me, or suspected, then I am required to contact authorities.

Reporting the Findings

I will write up the results of this study in my PhD dissertation. I hope to publish the findings in academic journals and share with educational stakeholders. I plan to use the data and findings to publish subsequent articles, to be presented at academic conferences and published in research journals. If you are interested, I will provide you with an electronic copy of the final dissertation.

Questions

If you have any questions, please ask me at any time. This research has been approved by the UPEI Research Ethics Board (no. 6007475). Any concerns regarding your involvement in this study may be directed to reb@upei.ca or by calling (902) 620–5104. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Tim Goddard.

Choosing to Take Part

If you decide to take part in this research study, please sign and date the consent forms (one for you, which I will sign, and one for me).

Sincerely,

Brittany A. E. Jakubiec
PhD Student, Faculty of Education
University of Prince Edward Island
bjakubiec@upei.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Tim Goddard
Professor, Faculty of Education
University of Prince Edward Island
tgoddard@upei.ca, Phone: 902.894.2843
Appendix C: Consent Form for Youth Participants

Dear Participant,

I invite you to participate in a research project called, “Exploring Sexual and Gender Minority Youth Identities in Prince Edward Island.” Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you might have.

Your signature on this form means that:

- **yes** no  You have read the information about the research. You understand what this study is about and what you are being asked to do.
- **yes** no  You have had adequate time to think about whether you want to participate.
- **yes** no  You have been able to ask questions about this study and are satisfied with the answers.
- **yes** no  You understand the risks and benefits (outlined in the information letter) associated with the study.
- **yes** no  You understand that you are free to withdraw from the study up until three weeks after our last interview together. You will not have to give a reason to withdraw from the study. I will retain the collected data, and you will be given an opportunity to correct and/or redact any information.
- **yes** no  You understand that the information you provide will be confidential within the limits of the law. That means in the unlikely event that abuse is disclosed to me, or suspected, then I am required to contact authorities.
- **yes** no  You understand that you can keep a copy of the signed and dated consent form.
- **yes** no  You understand that you can contact the UPEI Research Ethics Board at (902) 620–5104 or by email at reb@upei.ca if you have any concerns or questions about the ethical conduct about the researcher in this study.
- **yes** no  You understand that if you sign this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researcher from my professional responsibilities.
- **yes** no  You agree that the researcher may use quotations of what you said, but your name will not be identified in any publications or presentations.
- **yes** no  You agree to be audio recorded during our interviews.
Signature of the Participant __________________________

Date

Signature of the Researcher: I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and answered as best I could. I believe the participant fully understands what is involved in being in this study, any potential risks of the study, and that they have freely chosen to be in this study.

Signature of the Researcher __________________________

Date

If you would like to be informed of the results of this study, please include your email address:
Appendix D: Transcript and Data Release Form

Name of the Study: Exploring Sexual and Gender Minority Youth Identities in Prince Edward Island

Researcher: Brittany Jakubiec, bjakubiec@upei.ca

Dear Participant,

In relation to the research study entitled, “Exploring Sexual and Gender Minority Youth Identities in Prince Edward Island,” I (name of participant) have reviewed the transcripts of the interviews I had with Brittany Jakubiec. I was given time to alter, delete, and make any changes to the transcripts as appropriate.

________________________  ______________________
Signature of the Participant Date

________________________  ______________________
Signature of the Researcher Date
Appendix E: List of Resources for Youth

The Island Helpline provides free and confidential emotional support for islanders of all ages, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

Kids Help Phone: [https://kidshelpphone.ca/](https://kidshelpphone.ca/) 1 (800) 668–6868
Kids Help Phone provides counseling, online or on the phone, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

PEI Transgender Network: [https://www.facebook.com/peitn/](https://www.facebook.com/peitn/)
The PEI Transgender Network is an online community offering support for the transgender community on PEI.

Kings Wellness & Counselling grew out of an Interfaith /Interspiritual perspective celebrating all traditions and spiritual paths. Founded 35 years ago by Interfaith Ministers, Revs Barry and Sandi King, Kings Wellness and Counselling has grown to offer the best of both traditional and non-traditional counselling techniques. Kings Wellness & Counselling offers free\(^\text{21}\) individual and group therapy sessions to LGBTQ islanders.

PEERS Alliance [http://www.peersalliance.ca/](http://www.peersalliance.ca/) 1 (902) 566–2347
PEERS Alliance supports those living with and at risk for HIV, Hep C, and all STIs in PEI by offering a variety of programs and services targeted diverse communities. The centre serves people of all genders and sexual orientations.

PRIDE PEI: [www.pride-pei.com](http://www.pride-pei.com)
Pride PEI is a community organization that support services for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning Islanders and supporters.

Wabanaki 2-Spirit Alliance: [https://www.facebook.com/groups/wabanaki2spirits/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/wabanaki2spirits/)
An online community group that represents the emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical well-being and interests of Two Spirits and Indigenous LGBTQ+ individuals in Wabanaki Territory (NS, NB, PEI, NL, Gaspe region of QC, Maine).

\(^{21}\) Kings Wellness and Counselling in Charlottetown sets aside 15 sessions a month for LGBTQ islanders seeking free treatment.
Appendix F: Journaling Guide

Guided Reflection Questions

I ask that you keep a journal for two weeks in between our first and second interview. The amount of time and effort that you put in daily will be up to you; you could write for just a few minutes if you wish, or longer. This guide will provide some ideas that you can reflect on as you write in your journal. You can reflect on experiences, thoughts, and ideas. You can write it in whatever style you wish; you can write to yourself, in a “dear journal” format, you can write to me, or another mode that you think of.

Questions about your current life that you can reflect on

Conversations with Others
- Did you speak to a friend, girlfriend/boyfriend/partner, parent/guardian, teacher, counselor, etc. today about your sexual and gender identity?
  o What was this experience like for you?
  o How did the conversation go?
  o Did you want to say something but didn’t?
  o Was there anything said that bothered you?

Learning about Sexual and Gender Identity
- Did you learn about the topic of gender, sexuality, and/or identity today?
  o Where did you learn about it? (E.g., classroom, book, online, pamphlet, etc.)
  o What did you learn?
  o Did you agree or disagree with what you learned?
  o Do you feel like information was missing, or incorrect?
  o If you felt something was missing or incorrect, what would you add?

How you Learn About Identity
- How do you learn more about identity?
  o For example, who do you talk to?
  o What resources do you access?
  o Do you attend any LGBTQ+ friendly forums/events?
  o Does your school have a Gay Straight Alliance? (/Gender and Sexuality Alliance)
  o Do you take part?

Questions about your past that you can reflect on

Reflecting on Your Past
- When you think back in the past, when were you first aware that you first think that you might not be heterosexual or that you might be trans* // non-binary // agender // (another identity that you will tell me about)?
- How did you come to understand this identity?
  o Who did you talk to, if anyone?
  o What resources did you seek out, if any?
  o Were there any influences on your understanding of your identity that you would like to tell me about?
Appendix G: Script for Recruitment

This script is to be read aloud to participants.

You have been invited to participate in a research project called, “Exploring Sexual and Gender Minority Youth Identities in Prince Edward Island.”

“My name is Brittany Jakubiec and I am a PhD student at the University of Prince Edward Island. In this study, I am looking to understand LGBTQ youth understand their identities. I would like to interview 8 youth in PEI between the ages of 14 and 18, three interviews in total per person, and I would like you to keep a journal for two weeks. I will give you questions to write about. Questions might be like, “How do I identify?” or “How have I come to understand my sexual and gender identity?”

I will interview each LGBTQ youth three times and the interviews will take place in a public location agreed upon by us both. You do not need to prepare for the interviews in any way. The length of each interview will be about 60 minutes.

Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary, meaning it is up to you whether you want to take part. If you decide you want to take part, and then change your mind, you can withdraw with no repercussions.

Participants aged 14–18 are not required to seek consent from your parent or guardian; you can agree to take part on your own.

It’s important that your safety comes first. Speaking about your identity might bring up feelings that you want to speak to someone about. I will provide you with a list of resources that you can access if you want to.

If you want to participate, and/or if you have any questions, please get in touch with me. This research has been approved by the UPEI Research Ethics Board (no. 6007475). Any concerns regarding your involvement in this study may be directed to reb@upei.ca or by calling (902) 620–5104. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Tim Goddard (tgoddard@upei.ca).

Sincerely,

Brittany A. E. Jakubiec
PhD Student, Faculty of Education
University of Prince Edward Island
Charlottetown, PE
Contact: bjakubiec@upei.ca or by phone: 902.213.0175
Appendix H: TCPS 2 Certificate

Certificate of Completion

This document certifies that

Brittany Jakubiec

has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)

Date of Issue: 27 February, 2014
Appendix I: REB Approval

To: Brittany Jakubiec  
   Faculty of Education

Protocol Number: REB Ref # 6007475  

Title: Exploring sexual and gender minority youth identities in Prince Edward Island  

Date Approved: January 16 2018

End Date: January 15 2019

This research proposal has been reviewed and approved by the UPEI Research Ethics Board. Please be advised that the Research Ethics Board currently operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement 2: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (2014) and applicable laws and regulations.

It is your responsibility to ensure that the Ethics Renewal form is forwarded to Research Services prior to the renewal date. The information provided in this form must be current to the time of submission and submitted to Research Services not less than 30 days prior to the anniversary of your approval date. The Ethics Renewal form can be downloaded from the Research Services website (http://www.upei.ca/research/forms).

Any proposed changes to the study must also be submitted on the same form to the UPEI Research Ethics Board for approval.

The Research Ethics Board advises that IF YOU DO NOT return the completed Ethics Renewal form prior to the date of renewal:

- Your ethics approval will lapse
- You will be required to stop research activity immediately
- You will not be permitted to restart the study until you reapply for and receive approval to undertake the study again.

*Lapse in ethics approval may result in interruption or termination of funding.*

Notwithstanding the approval of the REB, the primary responsibility for the ethical conduct of the investigation remains with you.

Sincerely,

Lyndsay E. Moffatt, Ph.D.  
Chair, UPEI Research Ethics Board