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IDENTITY POLITICS, STATE STANDARDS, AND ON THE GROUND REALITIES: A CRITICAL POLICY ANALYSIS OF TEACHING/LEARNING GENDER/SEXUALITY IN A VIRGINIA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Dedication

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Abstract

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Even though America has seen an increase in the level of acceptance for people who

identify as LGBTQ and/or gender non-conforming, certain aspects within society continue to

hinder their rights, especially within public education. Specifically, there are insufficiencies

regarding content of and attitudes toward including LGBTQ issues in teaching and leadership

training programs. Add to that, the deficits in most Family Life Education (FLE) programs in

elementary schools as they lack adequate coverage of developmentally appropriate teaching and

learning about gender and sexuality. Taken together, it remains questionable whether the needs

of LGBTQ and/or gender non-conforming children can truly be met.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the policy discourse

concerning teaching and learning gender and sexuality issues during early childhood at an

elementary school in Virginia. Another purpose was to understand how educators perceive developmentally appropriate timing and content for these topics as well. A combination of critical policy analysis and critical advocacy research was utilized to compare and analyze the written policy discourse as presented within Virginia's FLE policy to educators' (teachers, counselors, principals) interpretation and enactment of these written discourses in their classrooms and schools. Findings revealed specific ways the written, spoken, and enacted discourses diverged and coalesced and how these similarities and differences inform future policy and practice. A critical analysis of the written discourses (and silences) suggest Virginia's FLE curriculum and instruction maintains heteronormative undertones, while the spoken and enacted discourses indicates concern for expanding elementary students' understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ and/or gender non-conforming children and non-normative family structures. Implications of findings include suggestions for future research and changes in policy and practice that aim to create more inclusive classrooms and schools.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Living in a modern society where social media, humanities, and self-expression have become more progressive and mainstream, America has been rapidly changing. Within the last decade, there have been amazing changes to our country such as having the first president who identifies as Black, a few states legalizing marijuana, and technological advances within medicine and entertainment. Along with these changes, as well as others, there has been an increase in the acceptance of various sexual identities in addition to non-heteronormative gender classification (Lugg & Murphy, 2014). The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) community has seen recent progressions in society such as the legalization of same-sex marriage, bathroom rights concerning gender identity, adoption rights, and ending the "don't ask, don't tell" policy in the military; and yet, prejudice and homophobic victimization still exists within America's public schools.

Even though the timeline of LGBTQ rights in America has accelerated in recent years, and several milestones established, change has been relatively slow in the realm of public education. For example, it was not until 1972 when Title IX was implemented in order to prevent discrimination, exclusions, and denial of educational opportunity based on biological sex (USDOE, 2015). Political change in terms of LGBTQ rights remained stagnant until the Federal Equal Access Act of 1984, which protected gay-straight alliances (GSAs) in American public schools. That is, "federally funded schools with at least one student-led extracurricular club cannot discriminate against students who wish to form additional clubs, provided that such clubs

do not interfere with educational activities" (Marx & Kettrey, 2016, p. 1270). Most recent political movement has focused on controversial debates regarding gender identity and bathroom rights in public schools.

Problem Statement

The idea of American youth identifying themselves as LGBTQ or gender non-conforming was nearly nonexistent or considered taboo as little as 20 years ago (Russell, 2010). Now issues related to the LGBTQ community have become newspaper headlines, means for protesting, and sparks for policy changes (Russell, 2010).

Even though America has seen an increase in the level of acceptance for people who consider themselves LGBTQ or gender non-conforming, certain aspects within society continue to hinder their rights. These aspects are considered to be social, political, and educational issues. These issues create and develop the evolution of today's American society.

The movement for gay rights or equality for all has been a controversial issue within social and political realms. These issues can include, but are not limited to religion, health care, military members, law and policies, and the necessity to label oneself as male or female. This means following what is considered to be societal gender roles, norms, and labels have been provocative in recent times. The LGBTQ community has experienced persistent challenges regarding content of and attitudes toward teacher training, equity, and feelings of safety (both emotional and physical) in schools (Szalacha, 2004). Furthermore, sex education has been seriously curtailed the past few decades (Biddulph, 2006; Snapp, McGuire, Sinclair, Gabrion, & Russell, 2015; Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014). Relatedly, discourses within family life curriculum and instruction usually focus solely on heteronormative relationships (Snapp et al., 2015). For example, in Kindergarten (K) through twelfth grade public schools in Virginia, there are serious

deficits in terms of diversity in Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOLs) broadly, and Family

Life Education (FLE) policy and curriculum specifically, resulting in support of heteronormative

curriculum and other foci by default. The resulting political push and pull has serious

implications for America's school children. For example, with newsfeed, Internet, and social

media at one's fingertips, many elementary age students are no longer naïve about gender and

sexuality issues. This early exposure can potentially lead to ever-younger students questioning

the meaning of gender identity and sexual orientation. This has led many educators and families

to question when and what is considered appropriate to discuss or teach with elementary school

students.

Study Rationale

It is a given that all schools should create and maintain safe and supportive environments

for all, but what does this really mean? The use of the word "safe" tends to indicate feelings of

physical safety and thus, the responsibility of educators to protect students –as much as it is in

their power– from bullying and/or other forms of school violence. However, the concept of

safety also involves emotional well-being. Additionally, educators, parents, and other

stakeholders also consider conceptions of safety, such as ensuring curriculum and instruction are

intellectually and developmentally appropriate. Thus, there are many considerations when

deciding the best policies and practices for schooling students along the K-12 continuum.

Research suggests that children and youth –especially LGBTQ students– who experience

unbiased curriculum and teachers, report feeling safer, learning better, and being bullied less

(Cowan & Klotz, 2012; Snapp et al., 2015) than those where these efforts do not exist.

While there is ample research dedicated to bullying or bias-based victimization generally,

there is a lack of research dedicated to the nature of bullying in the primary grades. Specifically,

there is little to no research exploring the progression of bullying for students who identify as LGBTQ or gender non-conforming. While the public at large seems to recognize the importance of studying and dealing with general bullying and peer victimization in public schools, bullying specific to homophobic victimization often generates feelings of discomfort. As a result, studying the nature of homophobic bullying as it progresses across the K-12 pipeline is a relevant but understudied issue.

Students who identify as LGBTQ or gender non-conforming in public schools have been oppressed and subject to prejudice or bias-based victimization and are at-risk for targeted behavior because of sexual orientation or choosing not to follow gender-role stereotypes (Jacob, 2013; Poteat, Scheer, DiGiovanni, & Mereish 2014; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011). There is a lack of educator awareness around the needs of LGBTQ students, especially, at the elementary school level. There is a troubling lack of research that has examined educational policy and mandated curriculum concerning sexual orientation and gender issues at the state level, in addition to an absence of understanding concerning the developmentally appropriate time to begin teaching students about sexuality and gender. Especially important is the need to understand elementary educators' perceptions of student readiness for sex and gender education, and whether state policies and mandated curricula are perceived to meet the needs of students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research is to examine the policy discourse around teaching and learning gender and sexuality during the elementary school years, and to understand educators' perceptions concerning when and how elementary students learn these topics. Such identity politics during the elementary school years include self-identity, family structure, and related

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discussions. Educators' perceptions are based on when they consider it is age appropriate to discuss such topics with students as well as how to pursue these discussions. Conversations are able to be both student and teacher led conversations. This research aims to analyze and compare both the current written and verbal discourses within Virginia's Family Life Education Standards to allow better understanding and possible clarifications regarding age appropriate discussions.

As an educator concerned with children finding identity, another purpose is to understand gender and sexual identity discourses more, explore the current research, and add to the literature. It is important for educators like me to understand current curriculum and policy guidelines in order make meaning and to determine educators' personal perceptions and preparedness. Also, understanding curriculum guidelines may help educators determine if the policy is consistent and if it matches educators' realities on the ground.

As the researcher, I conducted a thorough critical policy analysis of the Virginia Standards for Learning within the Family Life Education (FLE) standards and curriculum in Virginia's elementary schools. The purpose of such conducted research was to answer questions regarding teacher and learning gender and sexuality. For example, how should teachers handle or not handle questions and issues raised by students, teachers, and sometimes parents? Also, are educators comfortable teaching the standards as they are? Does the VDOE guidelines match what educators perceive as appropriate? If so, what changes in policy and practice need to take place in order to remedy conflicting discourses?

In addition to exploring what literature exists concerning teaching and learning about gender and sexuality during the elementary school years, the following research questions will guide study development and implementation:

1. What is the policy discourse around teaching and learning about gender and sexuality during the elementary school years, as maintained by Virginia Department of Education?

For example, what is the actual policy language? Did the VDOE include interpretive guidelines of the policy? Do the Standards of Learning align with policy language? How does the family life curriculum treat issues of gender and sexual identity?

2. What are elementary educators' (teachers, administrators, counselors) perceptions concerning teaching and learning about gender and sexuality during the elementary school years?

For example, how do educators interpret VDOE policy? Do educators interpret policy beyond legislative intent? If so, how?

3. How does the policy discourse compare to elementary educators' (teachers, administrators, counselors) perceptions?

For example, does the state curriculum enable educators to meet what they perceive as students' needs and readiness?

4. What are the implications of findings for future educational policy and practice?

Before outlining the methodology that will be used to answer these questions, a brief overview of the research literature is shared.

Brief Overview of the Literature

According to Gorski, Davis, and Reiter (2013), it is important to expose students to diversity at a young age as a way to decrease deficit thinking, stereotypes, and opportunity gaps. For the purpose of this research, diversity included gender and sexual identities, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), (dis)abilities, and native/secondary languages. However, gender

and sexual identities are typically dimensions of diversity that students in public schools are the least exposed to. Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar (2013) lament the situation:

> Adding to gender non-conforming children's marginalization in schools is the fact that inclusion of the experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming people in school curricula is exceedingly rare. The consistent consolidation of binary gender categories and the silences around gender non-conforming experiences in schools send messages to transgender and gender non-conforming children that they are not okay as they are. (p. 85)

For the purposes of this study, I focused on the existing research for both gender and sexuality, teacher preparedness, school curriculum and classroom discussions, and peer victimization as it pertains to elementary school students.

Gender and sexuality. The research suggests that America is not progressing as much as other countries vis-à-vis educating students about gender and sexuality. Relatedly, much of the existing research has taken place in other countries such as South Africa, Australia, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Netherlands, and Greece (Biddulph, 2006; Collier, Bos, & Sandfort, 2015; Gerouki, 2010; Neary, Gray, & O'Sullivan, 2016; Schieble, 2012; Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014). These countries, considered to be progressive, have shifted toward addressing identity politics in schools by altering curricula, books, and classroom discussions.

According to Schieble (2012) and Fischer (2003), gender and sexuality are social constructs as perceptions through privileged society that create a deceptive truth. Crotty (1998) discusses social construction as being "linked to the economic 'base' of society. Those who own the means of production in any society have the power to effect the kind of consciousness that obtains in that society" (p. 60-61). Therefore, it is crucial to contest gender and sexual

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oppression and stereotyping. For example, teachers might use books to show examples of boys who prefer playing the role of mom while playing house with peers. In addition, films might be used to depict girls who prefer to play with airplanes or other toys traditionally considered appropriate to boys. Other examples can include class discussions that explore athletic girls being stereotyped as "tom-boys," or boys showing femininity by wearing nail polish or clothing with "girly" colors (Stitzlein, 2007).

Schools follow heteronormative standards of femininity and masculinity, especially in the elementary school grades, as a way to maintain childhood innocence (Cullen & Sandy, 2009; Duke & McCarthy, 2009). Simultaneously, many educators pursue equality and inclusion for students in terms of (dis)ability and class and race, but often lose sight of integrating these values in terms of gender and sexuality norms (Neary, Gray, & O'Sullivan, 2016). There is emerging research that indicates that teacher and leadership preparation programs can make a difference in this regard (Collier et al., 2015; Connell & Elliot, 2009; & Knotts, 2012; Brant, 2014).

Educator preparedness. According to Connell and Elliot (2009), teachers are not only educators but also social justice leaders, and therefore, must be more mindful of childhood development as it relates to gender stereotypes. For example, Collier et al. (2015) explain, "among U.S. LGBT youth in one national survey, identifying a greater number of supportive school staff members was associated with greater feelings of safety at school" (pg. 35). This will decrease feelings of marginalization and rather gain acceptance and open-mindedness.

Sometimes school personnel struggle to appropriately intervene in bullying focused on gender and sexuality issues. According to Knotts (2012), many elementary pre-service teachers believe in promoting self-identity without being bullied, but are not sure how to implement this within the classroom. Research suggests that when faculty receive adequate training, they are

more confident in their abilities to intervene in bullying incidences regarding sexual orientation and gender (Collier et al., 2015; Knotts, 2012). Moreover, school faculty can make more meaning and connection to the current curriculum.

      School curriculum and classroom discussions. The absence of LGBTQ and gender open-mindedness in school curriculum and classroom discussions leads to feelings of shame and isolation (Connell & Elliott, 2009). Compared to images and messages depicted by social media, schools can become a healthier option for learning opportunities and awareness building (Gerouki, 2007).

      Ryan et al. (2013) understand "for many elementary school teachers, discussing topics of non-normative gender in their classrooms feels awkward, sensitive, or difficult at best—if not morally wrong, unnecessary, or impossible" (p. 85). However, after receiving adequate training and professional development, classroom teachers can gain confidence in addressing and leading discussions that can generate and sustain a safe environment for all students (Schieble, 2012).

      Currently, the majority of family life dialogues within the classroom assume heterosexuality and traditional gender roles, but taking a more inclusive approach before puberty can increase support and acceptance of others (Gerouki, 2007; Ryan et al., 2013; Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014).   In fact, Ryan et al.'s 2013 study "suggests that with carefully scaffolded lessons over time, gender diversity, like many other social issues, can be taught appropriately and effectively in elementary schools" (pg. 101). Other suggestions include using children's books related to gender identity, different family structures, and involving parents for support (Cullen & Sandy, 2009; Gerouki, 2007). Also, Larsson, Quennerstedt, and Öhman (2014) suggest gender norms could be challenged in physical education classes involving activities and sports teams where males are often assumed to be physically stronger and more apt to be interested in

sports than females. This creates stigmatization for both boys and girls if they do not fit this stereotype.

Is the lack of elementary curriculum and discussion due to the need to protect childhood innocence? Or, rather, is it what Sears (20009) refers to as a "camouflage [for] adult interest in protecting themselves from embarrassment, controversy, or inner reflection" (p. 194). Instead, educators should build "on children's experience, knowledge, and misconceptions" as it is a "critical pathway toward critical sexual pedagogy" (p. 194). Either way, the lack of discussion at younger ages may leave stigmas and feelings of marginalization as well as potentially increasing homophobia and putting students at-risk for being bullied or becoming bullies (Duke & McCarthy, 2009).

Peer victimization. There is a lack of research not only for bullying in the elementary school level but also regarding LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students. Farmer, Hamm, Leung, Lambert, and Gravelle (2011) conducted a study specifically on second grade students to find that even in the lower elementary school grades, bullying and victimization exists along with signs of an emerging social hierarchy. Without proper teacher preparedness to address gender norms in the classroom, homophobic victimization will be more likely to occur (Horton, 2014). LGBTQ students are victimized for not following heteronormative standards such as gender expression and sexual orientation (deLara, 2012; Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013; Kosciw, Bartkiewicz, & Greytak, 2012).

LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students have endured accounts of physical or verbal bullying due to sexual orientation, gender identity, and overall identity politics. Being physically bullied in school includes, but is not limited to, kicking, hitting, tripping, running into, spitting on, or other physical acts that are uninvited (Weaver, Brown, Weddle, & Aalsma, 2013).

Verbal bullying includes teasing, name-calling, threatening, or using expressions and jokes with homophobic undertones (Hillard, Love, Franks, Laris, & Coyle, 2014). For example, Hillard et al. (2014) describes a 2009 national study which "found that approximately 90% of the youth surveyed heard expressions where 'gay' was used in a negative way, such as 'that's so gay'" (p. 1). One particularly harsh example of mistreatment is the Anoka-Hennepin school district in Minnesota where repeated, severe, and ignored bullying led to several self-harm and suicides of LGBTQ students (Lugg & Murphy, 2014).

Short and long-term negative effects are possible with the bullying survivor. However, a specific definition or duration does not exist to determine the longevity of short and long-term effects from bullying. However, short-term effects are controllable, mediated, or overcome usually after leaving the public-school system but long term extends further (Poteat, Scheer, DiGiovanni, & Mereish, 2014).

Academically speaking, short-term effects from bullying can leave the victims feeling distracted, which can result in decreased school participation, attendance, and achievement. Participation can include overall classroom contribution, joining sports, or other extracurricular activities. School absenteeism can occur if a student feels unsafe due to physical, verbal, or cyberbullying. Achievement includes a decrease in homework or classwork completion, which can lower overall grades and test scores (Cornell & Dewey, 2011).

Short and long-term effects from homophobic victimization include depression, anxiety, stress, feelings of social rejection, lower self-esteem, and negative emotions such as sadness, anger, frustration, embarrassment, or fear (Lovegrove, Henry, & Slater, 2012; Poteat et al., 2014; Tanigawa, Furlong, Felix, & Sharkey, 2011). Long-term effects include but are not limited to substance abuse, drug abuse, self-harm, suicide or suicide ideation, sexual health risks, and

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incarceration (Lovegrove e t al., 2012; Poteat et al., 2014; Tanigawa et al., 2011). These risk factors are higher for LGBTQ students compared with their heterosexual classmates (Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011).

School climate and environment affect the overall feelings of safety in a school. Shah (2011) explains "schools where the harassment policy specifically addressed sexual orientation or gender identity, more students of all sexual orientations felt safe and reported less harassment and fewer negative remarks at school" (p. 17).   By empowering and preparing teachers to build safe classrooms, students can develop healthy and equitable viewpoints towards gender and sexual diversity (Duke & McCarthy, 2009). Thus, since teachers are responsible for the development of their classroom cultures; it holds that they should also be held accountable for including gender and sexuality issues in their teaching.

Methodology

In order to answer the four research questions, a qualitative research design was executed. A qualitative research design allows for more personal interactions with participants in an educational setting. The qualitative tradition also supports examining written discourses generally and using the critical policy analysis approach specifically (Mansfield, Welton, & Grogan, 2014).   Following Mansfield (2016), I used intersecting critical theories such as feminism and queer theory (QT), along with leadership for social justice (LSJ) conceptual lenses, to help facilitate a more holistic understanding of gender identity and the politics behind it. Examining data utilizing the QT lens could potentially, "liberate sexual minorities without falling back on essentializing assumptions that demand historically marginalized groups assimilate" (Lugg & Murphy, 2014, p. 1183). Relatedly, feminism insists that women (and men) have the right to choose how they want to identify themselves in terms of gender and sexual

orientation (Butler, 1990). Judith Butler's 1990 *Gender Trouble* may be 27 years old, but her notions toward feminism and the right to choose your identity stands relevant. Using LSJ, QT, and feminism together added a richness to data interpretation that might otherwise have not existed by using only one lens (Fischer, 2003).

Interviews and document analysis were used as primary data collection tools. All interviews were face-to-face and semi-structured. Interviews were transcribed for coding with ATLAS.ti and also used as part of a case study of a Virginia elementary school. Participants for interviews included certified FLE teachers, classroom teachers, school counselors, and administrators. A critical policy analysis and document analysis focused on Virginia's Family Life Education: Board of Education Guidelines and Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools in the Kindergarten through second grade elementary levels (policy, standards, curriculum, lesson plans). The goal of the interviews was to find out if and how educators addressed (or not) gender and sexuality in the classroom.

Summary and Conclusion

A growing need exists for ethical research in the area of elementary education with a focus on gender and sexuality in order to better identify and address bias-based bullying in the younger years. In addition, a need exists to better understand educators' perspectives on student readiness as well as how those perceptions coalesce or diverge from policy and practice. Finally, research is imperative to inform leadership practice that creates a socially just environment. This research aims to address these issues and by doing so add to the meager body of literature exploring gender and sexuality in the early years.

Looking Ahead

The next chapter gives a more detailed overview of related literature. Thereafter, additional specifics concerning the methodology are shared. Before delving into these components of the study, it is important to understand how I am defining particular terms, which are outlined below:

Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs): The Virginia Department of Education (2016) defines SOLs as, "the minimum expectations for what students should know and be able to do at the end of each grade or course" (para. 1).

Family Life Education (FLE): The VDOE (2016) describes FLE as a way to promote positive character, how to deal with peer pressure and other stressors, and to promote parental involvement however this varies by developmental stages and ability level.

LGBTQ: "Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning. This is an umbrella, inclusive acronym that is used particularly in the arena of community-based organizations that support LGBTQ youth" (Russell, 2010, p. 4).

Gender and Gender Identity: "Gender identity refers to an internal sense of self based on gender. One's gender identity may not be consistent with one's birth sex" (Russell, 2010, p. 4). GLSEN (2017) defines gender identity as:

How you identify and see yourself. Everyone gets to decide their gender identity for themselves. You may identify as a girl or a boy. If you don't feel like a boy or a girl, you might identify as agender, genderqueer, nonbinary or just as a person. You may choose not to use any specific term to define your gender identity, or you may use a term today that you decide later doesn't fit. You have a right to identify however you want, and your identity should be respected. (para. 2)

Sex: "Sex assigned at birth is the sex that the medical community labels a person when

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they are born" (GLSEN, 2017, para. 3). Your sex is determined by the physical body parts you are born with. Your sex is categorized as using binary language: male or female at birth.

Sexuality/Sexual Orientation/Identity: "Sexual orientation refers to an internal motivation or set of feelings, desires, and attractions to others based on their gender Sexual identity refers to the personal labels that people choose to describe themselves" (Russell, 2010, p. 4). Sexuality, sexual orientation, and sexual identity are depicted psychologically.

Bias-based Victimization: An intentional and repetitive aggression towards an individual or group that involves an imbalance of power and dominance. Aggression occurs in different forms within America's public-school system and is meant to oppress an aggressor's targeted victim or victims (Eisenberg, Gower, McMorris, & Bucchianeri, 2014; Gendron, Williams, & Guerra, 2011; Lee, 2011; Tanigawa, Furlong, Felix, & Sharkey, 2011; Waasdorp, Pas, O'Brennan, & Bradshaw, 2011).

Heteronormative Discourse: Gorski et al. (2013) defines heteronormative discourse as the primary viewpoint with which heterosexuality is seen as "normal" and any other ways are considered abnormal.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In an increasingly complex global society, schools frequently have to re-examine their understanding of the social and cultural dimensions that constitute "community." One such dimension is the sexual orientation of individuals who make up this group. Historically, this has been a difficult task, given the tension that exists between sexuality and education and the heteronormative practices within schools. (Biddulph, 2006, pg. 15)

Biddulph's (2006) quote is the perfect summarization of the problem at hand. Mansfield and Newcomb (2015) would add that while it has always been assumed to be gender-neutral and race-blind, schooling is actually a political endeavor and has been from the start. Add to that, the shift in national mood which is beginning to grant civil rights to people who identify as LGBTQ. Within the layers of social and cultural pieces in schools, gender and sexuality identification and discourses have become an issue worth researching.

The purpose of the following is to examine the scant research regarding gender identity and sexual orientation within the elementary school level (Sadowski, 2010; Sears, 2009). Gender and sexuality will be analyzed in order to provide more concrete definitions as well as making the connection towards elementary grade levels. Furthermore, educator preparedness will discuss potential necessity for more professional development in teaching diversity and tolerance. School curriculum and classroom discussions will be taking the idea of teacher preparedness one step further. Once teachers have been provided with professional development and feel better prepared, teachers will possess the tools to utilize tolerance teaching and diversity

awareness within their classroom. Lastly, peer bullying and homophobic victimization on

LGBTQ students in America's public schools will be analyzed with the following topics:

different faces of bullying, school level, and analyzing the diverse effects and outcomes from

inequalities and victimization on LGBTQ youth. Each section will provide more insight into

understanding when and what is considered appropriate to discuss or teach elementary school

students as well as knowing the current policy discourse around teaching gender and sexuality

issues in elementary school.

Gender and Sexuality

Some researchers suggest America is not progressing as much as other countries in

regards to educating students about gender and sexuality. This conclusion is due in part to the

fact that much of the existing research has taken place in other countries such as South Africa,

Australia, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Netherlands, and Greece (Biddulph, 2006; Collier, Bos,

& Sandfort, 2015; Gerouki, 2010; Neary, Gray, & O'Sullivan, 2016; Schieble, 2012; Wilmot &

Naidoo, 2014). These countries are considered by some researchers as more open-minded

regarding gender and sexuality within education through altering school curricula, books, and

classroom discussions. Biddulph (2006) discusses *Every Child Matters*, an initiative in the

United Kingdom, which promotes sexual health and safety. South Africa has adopted the

curriculum, *Life Orientation*, which discusses sexual identities, values, and beliefs (Wilmot &

Naidoo, 2014). Moreover, many European nations have developed and implemented teacher

education programs for their LGBTQ communities (Szalacha, 2004).

There are individuals who oppose any form of discussion and lessons in a public school

setting due to feelings of being inappropriate, against their religion, or moral beliefs to not only

discuss gender and sexuality in schools but to also discuss with children. Such individuals can

be parents, community figures, curriculum and policy makers, and even school educators. Robinson (2005) explains even though some educators understand the necessity to teach sexuality to children such topics are deemed as controversial and "difficult to negotiate personally and professionally. More often than not, they view this work as 'risky business'" (p. 175). In terms of being considered inappropriate, this tends to be due to personal beliefs, adhering to more traditional forms of heteronormative, nuclear families, and overall do not approve of LGBTQ individuals (Ryan et al., 2013; Schieble, 2012).

Most research found discussed both gender and sexuality together. Because of this, individuals tend to connect and respond to them as a group or unit even though they have separate terminology and definitions. Referring to the introductory chapter, terms were given for gender and sexuality. They will be relisted as to prevent "flip-flopping" of terms as well as to understand that even though the research is about teaching and learning both gender and sexuality, each possess their own differences, which not acknowledging could impede on vulnerable populations who have strong feelings about it. Moreover, it will also help readers to comprehend them as separate entities.

Gender. As previously discussed, the terms gender and gender identity is how you view and self-identify. You may choose to see yourself in a feminine aspect, masculine aspect, a combination of both, or either as the case may be. Your gender and gender identity is a personal choice thus it is not something you are born with (GLSEN, 2017; Russell, 2010). This is why individuals tend to mix up and confuse gender and sex. Your sex is the binary label of male or female that is given to you at birth based on your body parts (GLSEN, 2017). Another way to see it is gender is a social construct (Schieble, 2012). Your sex does not determine your gender.

Some do not view gender as a social construct (Schieble, 2012). This is also related to feelings against moral beliefs as a matter of ethics, values, or taboo (Biddulph, 2006; Gerouki, 2010). Other individuals oppose the teaching and learning of gender due to religious beliefs. Even though we have a separation between church and state in our country, many feel connected towards their faith (Biddulph, 2006).

In regards to teaching and learning about gender individuals question what is considered age appropriate to talk to and teach students about gender. They do not realize this type of topic has multiple levels and may not always be viewed in the act of taking away childhood innocence. For example, discussion of gender identity and expression can occur on a smaller level when a student makes fun of a boy for wearing pink or another "girly" color or if a girl is wearing a sports jersey and is dressing like a "tom-boy". However, student curiosity may grow into more complex discussions about gender identity when they ask or question about an older sibling or family member that may be gender non-conforming or if they see someone similar on television or the Internet. How is a teacher going to respond to the student?

Sexuality. Sexuality, sexual orientation, or sexual identity is different from the given meaning of sex. In fact, sexuality, sexual orientation, and sexual identity are also social constructs (Schieble, 2012). Your sexuality is related to how you feel, desire, and have attraction for others (Russell, 2010). Your sex does not determine this. Your gender does not determine this.

Similar to gender, many do not believe sexuality is a social construct (Schieble, 2012). This is also related to feelings against moral beliefs as a matter of ethics, values, or taboo (Biddulph, 2006; Gerouki, 2010). Other individuals oppose the teaching and learning of sexuality in schools due to religious beliefs.

The topic of teaching and learning about sexuality in schools has been considered a sensitive issue. As a result, tension can occur if not approached properly, because the idea of an "innocent, non-sexual child gives rise to a discourse of protection, which in turn reinforces discourses of innocence. In such a climate, talking about sexuality, and particularly homosexuality, in elementary (primary) school can be viewed as especially risky and unsafe" (Cullen & Sandy, 2009, p. 144).   The discussion of sexuality with younger students who are in elementary school is mainly geared toward sexual preference and attraction rather than speaking of physical sexual acts and pleasure.

The World Health Organization (2004, p. 3) defines sexual health as:

A state of physical, emotional, mental and social wellbeing in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.

Social constructs. We now know and understand that gender and sexual orientation possess two separate definitions but are both social constructs. As social constructs, it is necessary to reduce oppression and stereotyping that may occur (Brinkman, Rabenstein, Rosén, & Zimmerman, 2014; Ray, 2014; Schieble, 2012). For the purpose of this specific research and literature review, the following definitions will also be utilized for sexual orientation and gender along with the previously mentioned definitions. Sexual orientation refers to "the direction of one's sexual attraction, generally categorized as lesbian, gay, or bisexual" (Kerr & Multon, 2014, p. 183). Zosuls, Andrews, Martin, England, and Field (2016) define gender as "self-perceptions of the degree to which individuals feel like a typical member of their own gender category, and is

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generally assessed by asking children how similar they feel to members of their own gender" (p. 245). Sumara (2001) defines heteronormative standards as suggesting that being heterosexual is considered the societal norm within sexual orientation and being labeled as homosexual is negative and subject to being judged and criticized. Heteronormative standards are considered a deficit thinking which allows occurrences for oppression and social isolation. However, the last 30 years in American society have milestones within accepting gender and sexual identity development, which has led to an increase of youth identifying themselves to others at a younger age than they have in past years (Russell, 2010).

Childhood Identity

Referring back to the introductory chapter with Stitzlein's (2007) examples of gender identity and non-conforming role playing allows readers to reflect upon children's gender expression and identity through play. Brinkman et al. (2014) explain how gender expression and identity are affected by both the personalities and the number of children present. When children are playing with others they feel comfortable with, or if they are by themselves, children will typically display activities of play that are less gender specific or stereotypical (Brinkman et al., 2014).

Educational researcher, Barrie Thorne, wrote *Gender Play* in 1993, which discussed different ways children participate in a playful activity that is not stereotypical for their gender. This allows a child to develop their own type of gender non-conforming activities without doing so purposefully. The stigma behind this concept is associating gender with sexuality or sexual orientation, which is not the case. According to Stitzlein (2007), individuals stereotype and assume sexual orientation through gender crossing actions. For example, the previously mentioned occurrences of a boy playing the role of a mom or a girl who is playing with boys

leaves a stigma, which results in individuals assuming that he or she has homosexual tendencies due to breaking traditional gender roles (Stitzlein, 2007). However, this is not always the case thus social exchanges need not assume gender identity or sexual orientation.

Even though research has found schools follow heteronormative standards towards gender in the elementary school level, there is a small percentage of elementary age students who unintentionally display non-heteronormative characteristics at home or in school (Cullen & Sandy, 2009; Duke & McCarthy, 2009). Gregor, Hingley-Jones, and Davidson (2014) and Zosuls et al. (2016) suggest children become curious and sense their gender identity as young as two-years-old. Kerr and Multon's (2014) research suggests "Toddlers (ages 1–4) have a very fluid gender identity; being a boy or girl does not matter much to toddlers. This indifference gives way to gender rigidity in early childhood (about ages 4–7)" (p. 183). Other research claims gender identity is prevalent among three to four-year-olds (Halim, Ruble, Tamis-LeMonda, & Shrout, 2013). Similarly, other research suggests children begin to internalize beliefs about gender as early as the preschool years (McWilliams, 2014). The preschool years correlate with ages two through five.

Equitable Debates

This section debates if whether or not gender identity and sexuality are lifestyle choices or innate genetic traits (Schieble, 2012). We as researchers, queer theorists, feminists, advocates, and social justice leaders understand that your gender or sexual orientation is not a lifestyle choice; it is who you are. Unfortunately, those who oppose such non-heteronormative behavior and opt to follow what are considered societal stereotypes believe these are choices. One reason is due to external barriers Ryan et al. (2013) mention which could be made up of socio, political, religious, and parental beliefs. These external barriers can be reduced if adequate professional

development occurs, but it is debated whether or not teachers should be provided with such professional development (Schieble, 2012). Identity has also been a sensitive subject due to increased presence in news and media outlets as well as feelings of taboo for the reason of religious, moral, and personal beliefs (Biddulph, 2006; Gerouki, 2007). Discussing sexuality in school has always been a political issue. Ryan et al.'s (2013) research suggests that gender stereotyping begins as young as five-years-old when children enter Kindergarten. Individuals question whether or not teachers should be talking to young children about this, but as an educator what are you supposed to do when a student is bullied for looking or acting too masculine or feminine, or asks why Tommy has two mommies? Politics have constructed an invisible barrier around the discussion of sexuality and gender identity with elementary age students (Neary, Gray, & O'Sullivan, 2015). Because of this, public schools are caught in a web of trying to be equal and inclusive to all but still maintaining heteronormative teaching aspects and remaining unsure where the borderline is between equity, religion, comprehension, and teaching standards. Regardless, different perspectives and morals positions on non-heteronormative standards exist, which can create homophobic discourses in public schools (Biddulph, 2006).

Educator Preparedness

Since educators act as social justice leaders within schools, it is important to acknowledge the necessity for faculty members (teachers, counselors, administrators, etc.) to display mindfulness in terms of childhood development, gender expression, and stereotyping (Connell & Elliot, 2009). Since school faculty play a meaningful role in the growth and well-being of students, knowing different ways to support diversity is relevant. Allowing opportunities for more professional development will decrease feelings of marginalization and

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increase acceptance and equity between students as well as teachers, counselors, and administrators. Furthermore, educator preparedness will enhance the level of respect and allies among students and faculty as well as feelings of safety (emotional and physical) within schools (Sears, 2009; Szalacha, 2004). However, researchers Horn et al.'s (2010) and Bower and Klecka (2009) suggest educators feel unprepared by the different preparation programs attended due to the lack of addressing school related LGBTQ issues.

Educator preparation exists via professional development such as in-services, workshops, and continuing education classes. Szalacha (2004) as well as Blackburn and McCready (2009) explain the United States does have existing teacher preparation programs that address LGBTQ issues, but they are mainly located in urban, metropolitan areas. Also, programs are less prevalent in southern and northwestern states. The areas with little to no preparation programs regarding LGBTQ are also the areas in our country that have the highest percentage of homophobia (Szalacha, 2004). School districts in these areas continue to resist programs due to fear of outraged parents, hesitant community members, and personal outlooks (Szalacha, 2004).

Issues regarding LGBTQ are related to school integration, diversity, teaching tolerance, and equity. Preparation programs could situate issues related to LGBTQ within the realm of diversity and social justice issues (Knotts, 2012; Szalacha, 2004). In fact, Szalacha (2004) recommends "social justice issues must be examined in depth, with sexuality placed towards the end of the course, in order to ensure that students have developed understandings of theoretical concepts around power and inequality, and their relevance to education" (p. 72).

Research suggests educators are more confident in their abilities when receiving adequate training (Collier et al., 2015; Knotts, 2012). In fact, McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, and Russell (2010) believe "suggesting that sexual orientation and gender identity training for teachers and

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school personnel could help to reduce harassment of LGBT youth by empowering school personnel" (p. 1177). Most educators are concerned and want to support their LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students, but without successful training regarding this topic, some may lack necessary tools for effectively and positively supporting student self-identity (Knotts, 2012). The more prepared and capable an educator feels, the higher their self-efficacy will be therefore decreasing school-wide issues pertaining to identity politics (Mullen, Lambie, & Conley, 2014). Even though some progress has been made, educators still consider themselves underprepared and fear that accepting tolerance and non-heteronormative lifestyle choices will continue to be at a deficit (Horn et al., 2010). The better-prepared educators feel will better the potential for effectiveness, discussions, curriculum guidance, decision-making, and school safety (Mullen, et. al, 2014; Szalacha, 2004).

School Curriculum and Classroom Discussions

The deficiency of equitable LGBTQ and gender awareness in school curriculum and classroom discussions can permit intolerance and feelings of seclusion (academic and emotional) (Connell & Elliott, 2009; Sadowski, 2010). In terms of equity, another educational issue pertains to heterosexual students doing better in school than their non-heterosexual peers due to sociocultural contexts as well as bias-based victimization (Snapp, McGuire, Sinclair, Gabrion, & Russell, 2015). Gerouki (2007) believes this issue can be transformed through learning opportunities and awareness building in schools.

On the other hand, there are individuals who consider discussing gender and sexuality with children both inappropriate and immoral as a way to hide students from the truths within human sexuality (Janmohamed, 2014; Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014). Foucault (1979) claims "the social control of children's sexuality has its origins at the beginning of the eighteenth century

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when, in western society, children were seen as repositories of latent sexuality that needed to be controlled through education" (p. 104–105). "The assumption of heteronormativity has led to the normalization of heterosexuality in the curriculum" (Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014, p. 325). Because of this, it is common for educators to feel uncomfortable or awkward about gender and sexual orientation discussions, especially due to current controversial and sociopolitical issues within America (Ryan et al., 2013; Schieble, 2012). In spite of this there is a recent push for progressive actions within school curriculum and lessons.

Family Life Curriculum

A majority of current classroom lessons that discuss gender and sexuality take place within the Family life curricula. Current curricula assume heterosexuality and following gender roles, and therefore infrequently and insufficiently address issues of gender and sexuality equality and diversity (Gerouki, 2007). Within this research, diversity is relating to one's gender and sexual orientation. Discussions regarding LGBTQ individuals are typically negative due to discussions of at-risk behavior for HIV/AIDS, other sexually transmitted diseases, and sexual abuse, which could be oppressing these individuals (Connell & Elliott, 2009; Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014). This means that American public schools, even at the elementary level, can be social sites for non-heteronormative discourses (Gerouki, 2007). However, both Ryan et al. (2013) and Gerouki (2007) suggest allowing children to see gender in an appropriate, complex way to suppress assumptions, allow effective teaching for diversity, teacher-mediated discussions, and feelings of safety and belonging. This also means students will be able to independently develop their own critical lenses and opinions.

Curriculum Implementations Utilized

The few schools that expose LGBTQ within a school curriculum consist of learning about the lives, contributions, and timelines of LGBTQ people and rights. Such discussions and lessons allow greater opportunity for a safe, equitable, and less prejudicial school climate (Snapp et al., 2015). Snapp et al. (2015) explain, "when schools taught LGBTQ-inclusive curricula, students on average reported a greater sense of safety, heard fewer homophobic slurs and experienced less victimization…67% of LGBTQ students reported that their classmates were accepting of LGBTQ people when the school taught inclusive curricula" (p. 581).

Other curriculum suggestions that have been implemented or tested include using children's books related to gender identity, different family structures, and involving parents for support (Cullen & Sandy, 2009; Gerouki, 2007). One example of a children's book that does not follow heteronormative standards is *And Tango Makes Three* by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson. The authors tell a story about two male penguins living in a zoo who find an abandoned egg and raise the baby chick together. Cullen and Sandy (2009) explain after reading this story to students they "expanded the repertoire of characters in the book to explore various themes that arose, including the diversity of family structure, relationships and identities in the zoo. In the adaptation of the story, children included adopted, intergenerational, same-sex and single-parent families." (p. 145).

These implementations are created to provide more diversity exposure. It is not an overhaul or necessarily queering school instruction and curriculum. It is not telling teachers they should get rid of their cliché girl meets prince charming fairy tales. It is taking the progress American schools have made thus far with diversity and adding another piece to it. Much of the diversity students have learned about is racial and cultural. Adding diversity through literature in

terms of gender identity and sexuality is further deepening and adding a layer to the dimensions within equity as another way to decrease heteronormative societal privileges and hierarchies (Cullen & Sandy, 2009).

In the past it was nearly unheard of for schools to be reading literature and learning about African Americans and their contributions to our country, but that has evolved and changed over the years. Similar to gender identity and sexuality, race is also considered a social construct as a way to create hierarchy and exclusion. Since our country has been able to integrate lessons of race and honoring certain African Americans, doing the same for members of the LGBTQ community is not farfetched. In fact, since beginning this research, California has made progressive steps within this very area. The Los Angeles Times (2016) reported California will be adding lessons about LGBTQ individuals, their struggles and contributions to their history and social science curriculums.

Physical Education Curriculum

Larsson, Quennerstedt, and Öhman (2014) believe gender norms could be challenged in physical education (PE) classes involving activities and sports teams. Both males and females are stigmatized when males are said to be physically stronger than females and females as weaker than males. Also, many PE classes are gender segregated based on the type of sport or activity being played. Anderson, Cheslock, and Ehrenberg (2006) believe such schools are not in compliance with Title IX of the Educational Amendments within the Civil Rights Act of 1964 since it states, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal financial assistance" (Title IX and Sex Discrimination, 2015, para 2).

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What would a PE teacher do if a student who identifies themselves as a heterosexual female really wanted to play football, but was not allowed to because of her gender? What if that female student was so good at football that she could obtain a college scholarship but could not because of her gender? Or what if a heterosexual male wanted to play softball but only had a team for girls? Such questions put forth the gender identity and stereotyping discourse in public schools. If not addressed appropriately, childhood development could be hindered (Snapp et al., 2015). The examples of the girl wanting to play football and the boy wanting to play softball shows ways students can be unintentionally gender non-conforming. They are not altering their gender or sexual orientation rather each one simply wants to play a sport that does not follow their typical gender stereotype. Larsson et al. (2014) suggest PE classes should be gender-neutral or allow students various sports-related activities to choose from as a way to decrease gender discourse.

Include not Exclude

Is the absence of LGBTQ curriculum and discussion in elementary schools due to the marginalized feelings of taboo, resisting social change, and maintaining childhood incorruptibility? Regardless of the answer, the objective is to decrease stigmas and the number of at-risk students by teaching tolerance and accepting diversity to decrease homophobia and gender stereotyping (Duke & McCarthy, 2009). Furthermore, Duke and McCarthy (2009) believe the overall goal should be to create strategies that will support gender identity and expression, acquire a level of respect towards gender and sexual diversity, and make healthy choices regarding sexuality. Similar to people from diverse backgrounds whose cultures are taught in school, LGBTQ students want to discuss their differences and feel validation within

their schools but with less than 20% of LGBTQ students report having exposure to LGBTQ within the curricula, schools are still at a deficit (Duke & McCarthy, 2009).

Sadowski (2010) sums up classroom curriculum and discussion issues by stating:

Some parents or other groups may resist including LGBTQ issues in the curriculum. But if educators ignore certain students and certain issues because celebrating their interests, needs, or backgrounds is too controversial or too difficult, then school would never become a place for social reform. Teachers can never help make their students well-rounded, caring people if they don't do everything in their power to demonstrate that they themselves are caring and compassionate enough to embrace the backgrounds of all their students, even if it is challenged by others. (p. 60-61)

In other words, Sadowski would say that teachers should be agents of change however as public employees they represent the communities in which they teach. Taking a stand vis-à-vis sexuality and gender issues may put their jobs at risk. These issues will be discussed further in the Methods Section. Unfortunately, not many articles or journals exist addressing educators' advocacy. Brinkman et al. (2014) briefly addresses this in their research that educator advocacy tends to occur once a grade level or school-wide program has been implemented regarding teaching tolerance or social justice. Moreover, Robinson (2005) discusses how teachers are hesitant to take risks in terms of teaching non-heteronormative standards due to subject sensitivity, parent reactions, and even faculty and administrative reactions from those who oppose or feel uncomfortable about teaching it. Even though not much research is available what we do know is that those educators who want to display advocacy show hesitancy due to fear of putting their jobs at risk, or fear of rejection from parents and faculty members.

Peer or Bias-Based Victimization

Even though research exists regarding peer or bias-based victimization, there is a research deficit within homophobic victimization on LGBTQ or gender non-conforming students in America's public schools. Students who are LGBTQ or gender non-conforming are victims to bullying and victimization in and out of schools due to gender transgression and associating individuals with the sexual act rather than their identity because they are not following social and stereotypical gender roles, expression, and norms (Cowan & Klotz, 2012; deLara, 2012; Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013; Kosciw, Bartkiewicz, & Greytak, 2012). This section will discuss the types of bullying towards LGBTQ students in American public schools. There are different categories of bullying, but the specific types that will be analyzed are physical and verbal. Physical and verbal bullying are considered direct and are more traditional forms of bullying (Couvillon & Ilieva, 2011; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). Both forms of bullying on LGBTQ students will be discussed in general as opposed to on a specific grade or school level. Regardless of type, bullies seek power and control over their victims (Migliaccio & Raskauskas, 2013). Liias (2010) explains "fights are no longer about lunch money, they are about the very basic characteristics of our students, and bullies use the ubiquity of technology to harass and intimidate their victims 24 hours a day" (p. 22).

Swearer (2011) explains:

Recent media reports have drawn attention to youth who have been bullied due to their sexual orientation. Research conducted with 7,261 students (ages 13 to 21) in 2009 found that 84.6% of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, 40.1% reported being physically harassed and 18.8% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation. (p. 4)

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Physical Bullying

Being physically bullied is one of the most direct forms of victimization (Weaver, Brown, Weddle, & Aalsma, 2013). Some examples include kicking, hitting, tripping, running into, spitting on, or other physical acts that are uninviting (Weaver et al., 2013). Typically, physical attacks on LGBTQ students are not single events and tend to occur repeatedly.

A bully or aggressor uses physical mistreatment to show power, control, and generate fear which leaves emotional, social, and psychological effects. Physical bullying can also damage the body depending on the impact, type, and force used on the victim. Another aspect within physical bullying is the overall threat to hurt somebody through oral or body language. Physical aggression occurs more frequently among males than females (Lim & Hoot, 2015; Schoen & Schoen, 2010). It is also the most easily observed by witnesses and bystanders.

LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students have been physically bullied due to sexual orientation and gender identity. There have been several news articles and reports related to physical bullying of LGBTQ students, but one of the most controversial occurred in the Anoka-Hennepin school district in Minnesota. This school district faced controversy over severe bullying occurrences on LGBTQ students. As a result, several LGBTQ students committed suicide. Shah (2011) explains in extreme cases of bullying, "Some reported being urinated upon, stabbed in the neck with a pencil, and pushed into walls and lockers, often while being called anti-gay and gender-related slurs" (para. 4).

Regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, and following non-heteronormative stereotypes, no person should be a victim to any type of physical harm or violence.

Verbal Bullying

Connelly (2011) reminds readers "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me, isn't true" (p. 56). Verbal victimization, though not confirmed, is considered the most common form of bullying (Weaver et al., 2013).

Being verbally bullied is similar to physical bullying in that incidences are repeated by the aggressor. Verbal bullying can include teasing, name-calling, threatening, or other uninvited verbal assaults used to oppress an individual or group. LGBTQ students are not strangers to verbal aggression and harassment due to identity politics. It is common for both members and nonmembers of the LGBTQ community to be verbally harassed with homophobic undertones, expressions, and jokes (Hillard, Love, Franks, Laris, & Coyle, 2014). For example, Hillard et al. (2014) describe a 2009 national study which "found that approximately 90% of the youth surveyed heard expressions where 'gay' was used in a negative way, such as that's so gay'" (p. 1). Such expressions put forth the issue about equity, acceptance, and tolerance because these words are offensive towards the LGBTQ community both in and out of schools.

Even if an LGBTQ student is not being directly bullied, hearing jokes, words, and expressions with homophobic undertones may leave students feeling isolated and unsafe within their school. Using homophobic content in everyday language leaves anti-gay attitudes and behaviors present in schools. For example, Espelage, Basile, Rue, and Hamburger (2014) conducted a study that indicated that "91.4% of a LGBT middle/high school sample reported that they sometimes or frequently heard homophobic remarks in school, such as 'faggot,' 'dyke,' or 'queer.' Of these students, 99.4% said they heard remarks from students and 63% heard remarks from faculty or school staff" (p. 65).

As previously mentioned, the Anoka-Hennepin school district in Minnesota reported physical bullying. There were also incidences of verbal bullying which led to a major court case. The plaintiffs (LGBTQ peer victims) explain how, "They were subjected to anti-gay slurs at school, including 'dyke,' 'homo,' 'fag,' and 'queer,' nearly every school day. Some said they were told they were sinners or told to kill themselves for being gay" (Shah, 2012, para. 4).

Using any homophobic language directly to offend LGBTQ students, or even used indirectly, is still verbal harassment and isolating to an entire community of students within a school building. Regardless, any form of bullying can have lasting negative effects on LGBTQ students.

Gerouki (2007) explains that "pupils were too young to understand the content of such vocabulary and that they were merely parroting words they had heard, especially those pupils in the lower age grades" (p. 342) which further establishes the necessity to increase awareness and make discussion about gender identity and sexual orientation appropriate and suitable for younger children. Even though teachers, school counselors, and administrators work to decrease any type of bullying in schools, without sufficient training as previously stated, may deter from decreasing homophobic victimization.

School Level

Bullying in all school levels affect overall school climate and environment, feelings of safety, and extent of student engagement (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debman, & Johnson, 2014). In general, bullying is a school-wide problem that involves and affects bystanders, aggressors, and victims (Mehta, Cornell, Fan, & Gregory, 2013). This is especially so for LGBTQ students. The next section will focus on three school levels in American public schools: high school, middle school, and elementary school. The majority of high schools are ninth through twelfth grade,

middle schools are sixth through eighth, and elementary schools are Kindergarten through fifth.

Even though this research is geared towards the elementary school level, it is imperative to show

the known research within middle and high school levels in order to understand the problem at

hand. Also, it will show how much research is needed on the elementary school level due to the

ample research pertaining to the upper grade levels.

  High school. Griffin, Brown, and Warren (2012) state:

  In 2010, anti-gay bullying in schools across the country led to the suicides of at least 13

  teenagers in a two-month period. These unfortunate events attracted national media

  attention and pushed school boards, educators, parents, and even the U.S. Department of

  Education to confront bullying more seriously. However, many anti-bullying initiatives

  have been so focused on addressing student behavior that they fail to address the

  prejudice and intolerance that underlie students' antagonistic interactions. (p. 159)

  Such tragic suicides led to an online campaign; It Gets Better, was developed

(Lovegrove, Henry, & Slater, 2012). Greater bounds and initiatives over the last few years have

occurred to dissipate bullying and victimization on LGBTQ students. As a result, the amount of

bullying occurrences in high schools has decreased compared to middle schools (Griffin et al.,

2012).

  Besides the It Gets Better campaign, not many bullying and behavior interventions that

focus on identity politics exist. However, there is an intervention that Griffin et al. (2012) discuss

in their research called the Intergroup Social Change Agents (I-SCA) which has been used in

high schools. Though it does not specifically discuss the LGBTQ community, it is a positive

approach to solving social justice issues such as gender and sexual identity in schools. Using

conflict resolution puts the power into the hands of the students to make a positive impact and

change. I-SCA uses a small group of students to engage in conversations to help explore,

understand, and accept each other's differences and group biases. This carries potential to foster

social justice and understanding for LGBTQ students. Furthermore, the students learn how to

collaboratively work together and use conflict resolution non-violently as a way to enhance

social justice and decrease the oppression of minority groups (Griffin et al., 2012).

Middle school. Research shows how incidences of bullying occur the most during the

middle school years (Farmer, Hamm, Leung, Lambert, & Gravelle 2011; Jenson, Brisson,

Bender, & Williford, 2013; Kueny & Zirkel, 2012). Social dynamics in terms of identity and

stratification form in middle school, which lead to bullying others who are different from

themselves (Chen, Hann, Farmer, Lambert, & Mehtaji, 2015).

One reason is the transition from elementary school to middle school. Farmer et al.

(2011) explain how middle school is "a heightened period for involvement in bullying because

the lack of a defined dominance hierarchy is thought to promote jockeying for social positions

among students," and "youth tend to establish hierarchical social structures that are comprised of

distinct peer groups that are typically distinguished by shared behavioral and social

characteristics such as academic achievement, level of aggression, and perceived social

prominence" (p. 1106).

Besides transitioning into middle school, this time period overlaps years' students are

beginning puberty and trying to discover themselves regarding gender or sexuality. This is

considered a sensitive time for students (Lee, 2011; Letendre & Smith, 2011). Furthermore, the

combination of school transition and puberty lead to individual and social insecurities or

dominance, and emotional and physical changes (Jenson et al., 2013; Swearer, 2011). All of

these factors lead to an increase in bullying during the middle school years. Because of all this

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type of change in pupils both academically and developmentally, this would be a time for students and parents to heavily utilize their school counselors for further support and guidance.

Regarding bullying on LGBTQ students in middle school, homophobic teasing has increased occurrences. According to Espelage et al. (2015) "homophobic teasing or name-calling perpetration is a particular form of gender-based name-calling (e.g., calling others 'gay' 'fag') that friends and non-friends engage in" (p. 2543).

Espelage et al. (2015) continues to explain:

Homophobic teasing or name-calling is a commonly reported experience, particularly by students who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender...students frequently experienced incidents of name-calling (82%) and being teased (58%), and had incidents of assaults (60%). These students also experienced rumor spreading (59%) and social isolation (27%). But homophobic teasing is not only directed at sexual minority students. In California, a large-scale survey of students in Grades 7 to 11 found that 7.5% reported being bullied at school because of their actual *or perceived* sexual orientation, with two thirds of those students who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender reporting victimization. (p. 2544)

Elementary school. Currently, a lack of research exists not only for bullying in the elementary school level but specifically regarding LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students. Simply because there is little to no research about bullying students who are LGBTQ in the elementary school level does not mean that it fails to exist.

Farmer et al. (2010) conducted a study specifically on second grade students to find that even in the lower elementary school grades, victimization exists as well as signs of a beginning social hierarchy. Furthermore, Lovegrove et al. (2012) explain how "young males who were

identified as bully/victims by their peers at school were more frequently exposed to parental aggressive strategies, marital conflict, and maternal hostility than other boys before starting Kindergarten" (p. 78). This means if students, mainly males, have exposure at a young age like Kindergarten, then they might be prone to becoming a bully or victim. Exposure at a young age carries lasting effects on a child. If we can detect early warning signs for victimization, then bullying could potentially decrease.

Bullying intervention initiatives that address identity politics in all three school levels are necessary. Whenever gender was discussed, it was listed as male and female or stating that boys tend to be the victims of bullying more than girls (Willis & Griffith, 2010). None of the studies gave the option for students to identify themselves as gender non-conforming or transgender. Since none of the studies asked that question, it is not possible to determine if gender identity would have impacted the results. This is important to note because most of the studies were about bullying in general based on school level and lacked the components related to bullying due to gender and sexuality. This could potentially be a gap in the research.

One of the few times when sexual orientation was noted in the research, it was to acknowledge that "bullying may be more likely among those with stigmatized characteristics related to health (e.g., disabilities, obesity) and sexual orientation, and those with stigmatized characteristics may experience worse mental health effects from bullying" (Bogart et al., 2014, p. 442). However, Bogart et al.'s (2014) study did analyze sexual orientation more in depth since 12% of students or 533 students in their survey stated they were not heterosexual between grades fifth through tenth. Fifth grade through tenth does represent all school levels however within the elementary school, fifth grade is considered an upper grade. Results indicated that due to instances of bullying, students' overall quality of life and self-worth decreased while the number

of students with depression increased (Lovegrove et al., 2012). Jacobson, Riesch, Temkin, Kedrowski, and Kluba (2011) and Perkins, Perkins, and Craig (2014) explain how such affects from bullying in as young as fifth graders can make schools feel insecure rather than being a safe haven for all.

McCuiston (2010) quoted United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stating: "A school where children don't feel safe is a school where children struggle to learn. It is a school where kids drop out, tune out and get depressed. Not just violence but bullying, verbal harassment, substance abuse, cyber-bullying and disruptive classrooms all interfere with a student's ability to learn. The fact is that no school can be a great school until it is a safe school first. (para 8)

This means that the school climate and environment affect the feelings of safety in a school (Green, Dunn, Johnson, & Molnar, 2011; Hurford et al., 2010). Shah (2011) explains how "A 2005 survey of more than 3,400 middle and high school students by GLSEN found that at schools where the harassment policy specifically addressed sexual orientation or gender identity, more students of all sexual orientations felt safe and reported less harassment and fewer negative remarks at school" (p. 17). More needs to be addressed in terms of national laws, policies, and intervention plans within each school level in order to reduce bullying, particularly because there is a gap in addressing bullying related to some diversity areas regarding LGBTQ youth.

Effects and Outcomes

It is evident from the preceding two sections that LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students suffer repercussions and different outcomes regardless of the type of bullying that took place as well as the school level it occurred in. Outcomes or effects vary but they can be short

term or long term, negative or positive on LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students. I will be analyzing each effect based on the current research.

Short term effects. A specific definition or timeline does not exist to determine how long a short term effect from bullying can last on an individual. However, if it is a short term effect then such bullying consequences can be controlled, mediated, or overcome usually after leaving the public school system (Poteat et al., 2014).

Homophobic victimization on both LGBTQ and heterosexual students could lead to increased health and mental issues such as anxiety, symptoms of depression, stress, and feelings of social rejection (Lovegrove et al., 2012; Poteat et al., 2014; Tanigawa et al., 2011). According to Poteat et al. (2014) and Russell et al. (2011) these short term effects occur more for males than females due to the pressure of following gender norms for what is considered to be masculine or feminine. Such health and mental health issues could also lead to students having feelings of loneliness, rejection, and isolation not only in schools, but also within families and community (Matthews & Salazar, 2012; St. John et al., 2014; Tanigawa et al., 2011).

There are numerous short term effects that directly affect a student academically. Couvillon and Ilieva (2011), Russel et al. (2011), and Snapp et al. (2015) explain how bullying can leave the victims feeling distracted, which can result in decreased school participation, attendance, and achievement. Participation can include overall classroom contribution or joining sports or other extracurricular activities. School absenteeism can occur if a student feels unsafe in school due to physical or verbal bullying (Snapp et al., 2015; St. John et al., 2014). Achievement includes a decrease in homework or classwork completion, which can lower overall grades and test scores (Cornell & Dewey, 2011). Aragon, Poteat, Espelage, and Koenig (2014) express how "consequences of such homophobic school environments on LGBTQ

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students include ostracism, physical violence, verbal harassment, a decline in academic performance, school failure, school dropout, and a decrease in involvement in school and extracurricular activities" (p. 2). If oppressed LGBTQ students do not receive support and help then more harmful, long term effects such as dropping out of school or worse may transpire (Green et al., 2011).

Long term effects. Similar to short term effects, a specific duration to determine the longevity of a long term effect does not exist. Russell et al. (2011) describes long term effects on LGBTQ students as having a "lasting influence of school victimization for health and well-being in the years after formal schooling and into young adulthood" (p. 224). It is also important to note that for both short and long term effects, many times the negative effects on mental and emotion aspects could also negatively impact physically thus also having both physical short and long term effects from victimization as well (Barden, Conley, & Young, 2015).

If health and mental health remain complicated and unresolved from bullying, then long term effects will occur. For instance, having a lower self-esteem can be considered a short term effect however it can lead to long term effects as well. Cooper and Blumenfeld's (2012) study reported increased levels of victimization towards LGBTQ youth lead to increased levels of depression, anxiety, and lower self-esteem. Related to lower self-esteem is possessing negative emotions such as stress, sadness, anger, frustration, embarrassment, or fear directly related to homophobic victimization (Berkowitz, De Pedro, & Gilreath, 2015; Hinduja & Patchin, 2013).

Lovegrove et al. (2012), Russell et al. (2011), and Poteat et al. (2014) discuss how other health and mental health factors related to homophobic victimization include substance abuse, drug abuse, suicide or suicide ideation, and sexual health risks. These risk factors are higher for LGBTQ students compared with their heterosexual classmates (Russell et al., 2011). Moreover,

Russell et al. (2011) and Madsen and Green (2012) claim negative effects from bullying on LGBTQ students are worse when it is related to a prejudice or bias-based victimization. As a result, it can lead to increased levels of physical abuse, self-harm, substance or drug abuse, sexual abuse, and incarceration. Each of these is a health, mental health, and safety concern.

Students who were physically bullied in school could continue to be victims of physical abuse. Also, individuals could physically abuse themselves in the form of self-harm. Alfonso and Kaur (2012) describe how self-harm, also known as self-injurious behavior, cutting, and self-mutilation is an increasingly growing problem for children with an average age beginning around 11 to 15 years old, which is primarily sixth through eighth grade. This is not necessarily a suicidal tendency, but it occurs through triggers from bullying or used as a coping mechanism (Alfonso & Kaur, 2012). Another negative outcome used as a coping mechanism is substance or drug abuse. Without care and treatment, it may become a pathway to suicidal behaviors and ideation (Litwiller & Brausch, 2013).

Suicide is a horrific outcome of bullying regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. The high number of suicides in recent years is a direct result from peer victimization (Biddulph, 2006; Litwiller & Brausch, 2013). Within the LGBTQ community, students are more at-risk for suicidal thoughts and actions than heterosexual students (Mueller, James, Abrutyn, & Levin, 2015). Over the last decade, suicide among students between the ages of 10 to 19 years old is the third leading cause of death in the United States (Bhatta, Shakya, & Jefferis, 2014; Litwiller & Brausch, 2013; Murphy, 2014; Reed, Nugent, & Cooper, 2015). When discussing suicide, it is analyzed in segments from ideation and behaviors, planning and attempts, and the unfortunate suicide completion. Within adolescent suicide research the percentages of males and females compare and contrast however, there is no mention of students who identify as

transgender or gender non-conforming, even in research specifically geared for non-heterosexual students.

Participating in unsafe or negative sexual behaviors can be a form of sexual abuse from relational or verbal bullying as a student (Litwiller & Brausch, 2013). Moreover, Litwiller and Brausch (2013) explain how "these findings suggest that sexual behavior may represent a means of coping with negative psychological consequences of victimization. Investigations of these behaviors demonstrate that unsafe sexual behavior may have consequences comparable to victimization" (p. 677).

Lastly, incarceration could be another negative outcome from bullying (Perius, Brooks-Russell, Wang, & Iannotti, 2014). Some LGBTQ students have felt so threatened and unsafe in schools, they felt as if they were being pushed out of the public school system. Such choices and consequences could eventually lead individuals into the criminal justice system (Snapp et al., 2015).

Positive outcomes. Even though numerous negative effects and outcomes transpire from bullying, there are LGBTQ individuals who are able to move forward and live healthy, positive lifestyles. According to Modigliani (2012), anybody can possess the ability to overcome and move forward from a negative situation. Making good positive choices can give individuals the power to move on, help others, and even prevent future prejudice and inequalities on LGBTQ students. This can lead individuals to regaining their inner strength, self-esteem, and self-worth as a positive effect (Rivers, 2001). LGBTQ students can also receive proper social support from parents, counselors, teachers, and peers in order to regain such positive effects (Tanigawa et al., 2011). For example, Sadowski (2010, p. 60) states "students in my classes who are LGBTQ themselves have sometimes focused on the role that they might play as role models and mentors,

drawing both on research on the lack of representation of openly LGBTQ people in schools (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Sadowski, 2008b) and the value of mentoring for students in supporting positive development and orientation toward the future."

Members of the LGBTQ students have become role models, mentors, and leaders within their school and community. One example is creating a gay-straight alliance (GSA) within public schools. Students from all backgrounds and sexual orientations can feel safe to discuss bullying and oppression together. Also, students can feel safe discussing personal previous and current occurrences within different school levels. Ramirez (2013) suggests that discussing and facilitating appropriate coping skills can allow for better understanding and lessen potential stress and other mental health factors. Greytak et al. (2013) explain that "research indicates positive benefits for LGBTQ youth who have GSAs at their schools, including lower levels of in-school victimization, increased feelings of safety and fewer absences" (p. 47). This allows a decrease in both short and long term negative effects from bullying, a decrease in bias-based victimizations, and allows LGBTQ students to feel safe, welcome, and included in their school and community (Marx & Kettrey, 2016; St. John et al., 2014). These outcomes will enhance the climate, environment, and levels of morale in schools.

Besides creating a school GSA, other positive implementations could be creating more policies and associations for LGBTQ students. For example, in New York, the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA) was passed and signed into a law in September 2010 (O'Donnell, 2010). In New York public schools, DASA became involved in order to decrease prejudice and bias-based bullying (O'Donnell, 2010). However, St. John et al. (2014) emphasized that creating GSA's are positive approaches, but only a starting point to improve schools and equality for LGBTQ students. Another positive implementation to decrease bullying and increase tolerance

would be to clearly establish and define the roles specifically for counselors, administrators, and teachers within situations of peer victimization.

Conclusion

Schools should create safe and inclusive environments for all children to feel validated and unoppressed. If schools opt to have a lack of inclusion via diversity in terms of gender and sexuality then schools become at-risk for inequity and feelings of safety (Schieble, 2012). In turn, this could make LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students to be at-risk for not gaining both acceptance from others or self-acceptance. Educators, preparation programs, and policy makers should understand that minorities in schools go beyond racial and ethnic identities (Gerouki, 2007). Minorities also exist through social norms and discourses in gender and sexuality.

Even though the research currently shows more negative than positive effects and outcomes, finding some positive results can allow promising and optimistic futures for LGBTQ students who have been victimized or felt oppressed. By discussing and addressing homophobic victimization and incidences in schools, it could help to potentially find triggers for bullying as well as ways to decrease it. Early discussion will help as well. Many researchers, educational leaders, and advocates agree with Ray (2014) in wanting America to celebrate diversity in all aspects of it.

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

This section describes the applied methodology for this study. First, I further describe the purpose of the study followed by an overview of the research questions and correlating methods. Thereafter, I describe in greater detail the research design, including site selection, the population and sampling of participants, and instrumentation and data collection. Next, I provide an explanation of data analysis procedures and the theoretical frameworks undergirding them. Finally, I close with an explanation of the potential limitations to the study.

Purpose and Research Questions

The overall goal of this research was to examine policy discourses concerning teaching/ learning gender and sexuality issues during the elementary school years. Another purpose was to understand how educators perceive timing and content for teaching/learning gender and sexuality issues including but not limited to: self-identity and family structure. This research aimed to compare and analyze the written policy discourses as presented within Virginia's Family Life Education (FLE) Standards of Learning (SOLs) with teachers' interpretations and enactment of these written discourses. Understanding where policy intent and policy interpretation and implementation diverge and coalesce helped us identify possible gaps between policy and practice, as well as within the written and enacted discourses, to spur social justice praxis where it is needed. In addition to identifying when and what should/should not – is/is not – stated in policy and enacted in classrooms, this research may also help the field identify early warning signs and triggers for peer or bias-based victimization of LGBTQ and gender non-conforming

students and how we might address them.

The following research questions guided study development and implementation:

1. What is the policy discourse around teaching and learning about gender and sexuality during the elementary school years, as maintained by Virginia Department of Education?

For example, what is the actual policy language? Did the VDOE include interpretive guidelines of the policy? Do the Standards of Learning align with policy language? How does the family life curriculum treat issues of gender and sexual identity?

2. What are elementary educators' (teachers, administrators, counselors) perceptions concerning teaching and learning about gender and sexuality during the elementary school years?

For example, how do educators interpret VDOE policy? Do educators interpret policy beyond legislative intent? If so, how?

3. How does the policy discourse compare to elementary educators' (teachers, administrators, counselors) perceptions?

For example, does the state curriculum enable educators to meet what they perceive as students' needs and readiness?

4. What are the implications of findings for future educational policy and practice?

The purpose of research question one was to identify specific policy discourses within the elementary school level involving teaching and learning gender and sexuality in Virginia public schools. The purpose of research question two was to identify the perceptions towards teaching and learning about gender and sexuality from elementary educators. These perceptions helped to determine consistency among the curriculum and policies among educators. The purpose of

research question three was to compare the overall policy discourse to educators' perceptions to continue to determine consistency, preparedness, and readiness to teach. Lastly, the purpose of research question four was to identify potential implications of findings for future educational policy and practice. Table 1 is a methods matrix which outlined the methods and sources utilized in order to answer the given research questions.

Table 1: Methods Matrix

Research Questions	Methods	Sources
What is the policy discourse around teaching and learning about gender and sexuality during the elementary school years, as maintained by Virginia Department of Education?	Document Analysis Interviews Observations Field Notes Curriculum	VADOE Policy # 22.1-207.1 22.1-207.2 BOE Guidelines Standards of Learning: Family Life Education
What are elementary educators' (teachers, administrators, counselors) perceptions concerning teaching and learning about gender and sexuality during the elementary school years?	Interviews Observations Field Notes Journaling Curriculum	Elementary educators (teachers, counselors, administrators)
How does the policy discourse compare to elementary educators' (teachers, administrators, counselors) perceptions?	Discourse Analysis Document Analysis Coding Interviews Curriculum Journaling	All of the above
What are the implications of findings for future educational policy and practice?	Journaling Critical Discourse Analysis Critical Policy Analysis Critical Advocacy Research	All of the above

Research Design

In order to answer the four research questions, a qualitative research design was executed. Marshall and Rossman (2006) describe that a qualitative research design is, "enacted in a natural setting, draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of the participants in the study, focuses on context, is emergent and evolving, and is fundamentally interpretive" (p.

2). Moreover, a qualitative design allowed the merging of interpretive and critical frameworks (Mansfield, 2016) as well as provided more personal and human interactions with participants in an educational setting (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Furthermore, Merriam (2009) would agree, adding that qualitative research could potentially elicit deeper meaning making of participants' experiences and how they made sense of the world around them.

Building on the qualitative tradition, this research entailed using a critical policy analysis approach to enhance the meaning and understanding of the research by going beyond description to critique and facilitate change. For example, in narrative policy analysis (Yanow, 2000), taking a qualitative approach allows us to identify and describe the policy artifacts, policy actors, and xxx. Beginning the research process with Yanow's narrative approach provided information pertaining to different social or economic problems in order to advise policy makers and advocate or lobby for a specific group, for example. Critical policy analysis (CPA), however, goes further. CPA aims to uncover silences and gaps and consider different policy positions via a critical lens in order to find potential discourses that need resolution (Fischer, 2003). Fischer also goes further than Yanow by suggesting that the final step in the policy research process might include action, or what others (e.g. Lugg, 2006; Shields, 2012) refer to as critical advocacy.

Before defining what critical advocacy research is, it is important to note that terms for advocacy and activist are often used interchangeably (Lugg, 2006; Shields, 2012). Critical advocacy research looks for reasonable ways to address prejudice and make societal changes without also scorning or rejecting people with opposing interpretations and beliefs (Shields, 2012). Some may claim that critical and/or advocacy research is biased. However, Fischer (2003) argues that, "in the advocacy role, the analyst is generally asked by the client to go

beyond the issues of efficiency and offer advice about what the objectives themselves should be" as well as "taking the initiative and pushing out the boundaries of the possible in public policy" (p. 183). Moreover, Shields (2012) believes taking a critical advocacy approach is essential for studies that "cannot be done experimentally and that require an ethical advocacy stance to address injustice and/or inequity" (p. 5) which holds true for the research conducted here.

For instance, as an educator I witnessed firsthand any inequities or areas in need of advocacy frequently within the school and classroom setting, which could be why I possess a preference towards utilizing critical advocacy research within a critical policy analysis and case study for this research study. Furthermore, being an educator on the ground, knowing prejudices exists, and societal changes are needed makes it difficult for me not only as an educator, but as the qualitative researcher to remain neutral. This is why I have to situate myself with critical advocacy research in order to professionally address any injustices or inequities I have found. This also reassures what Shields (2012) and Fischer (2003) previously stated about the need to go beyond and knowing it is ethical to take an advocacy approach to non-experimental, qualitative research.

Lastly, a case study was conducted in order to further the qualitative research, gather more evidence for the critical advocacy research, and to gather interpretations and perspectives to aid in the critical policy analysis. Fischer (2003) believes utilizing case studies will assist in gathering more information and having an importance on social meanings towards the issue being explored. Similarly, Yin (2009) states that case studies are an examination of a modern social phenomenon. In qualitative research, this is especially so since on site interviews and observations had been conducted as a way to make meaning of the research at hand.

Figure 1 provides a flow chart for examining qualitative research specific for this study

utilizing a critical policy analysis with critical advocacy research.
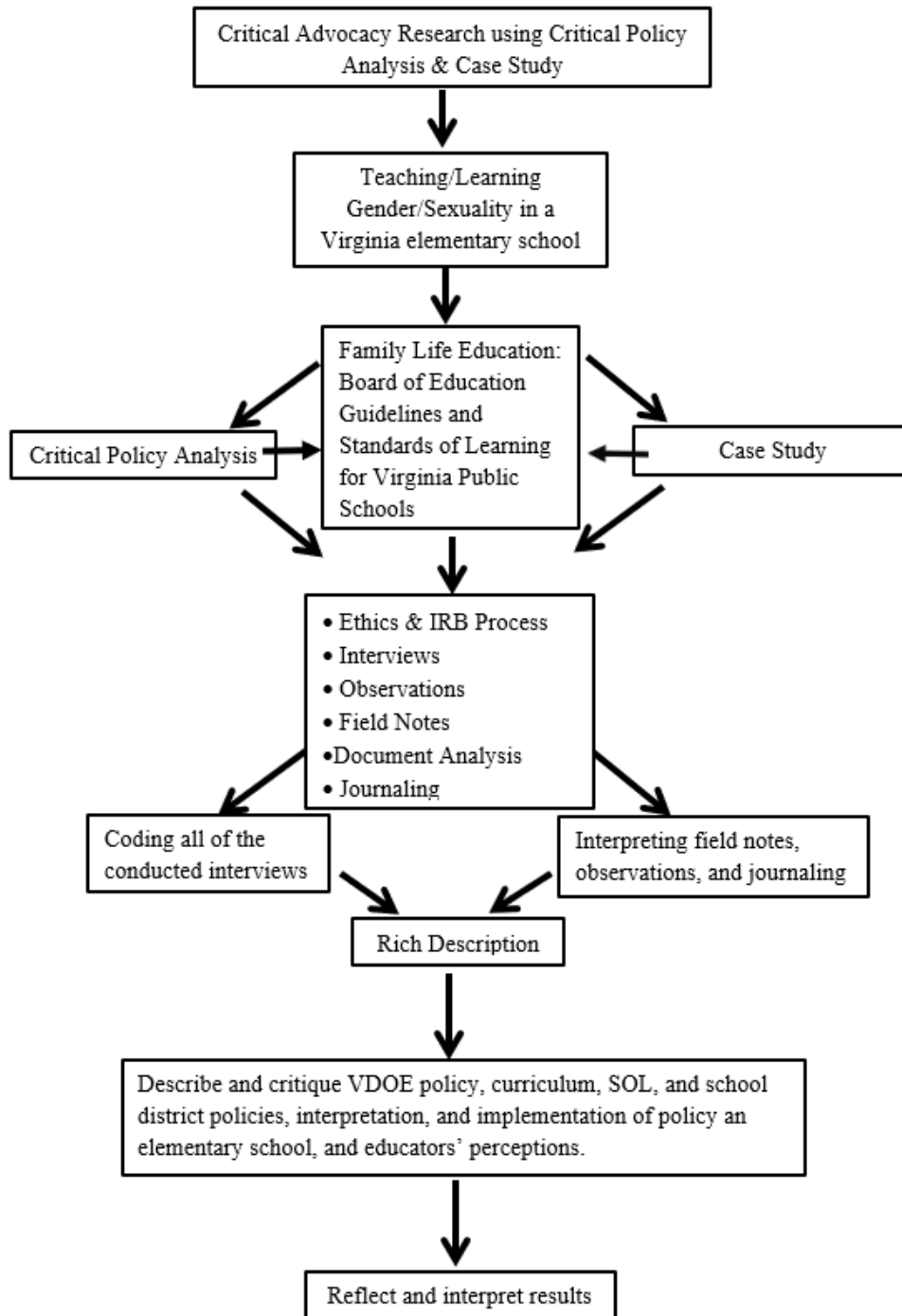
Figure 1: Critical Policy Analysis Map

Participants

The population from which the participants were selected included all elementary school administrators, counselors, elementary teachers, and certified FLE teachers in Virginia. The original plan was to provide for some possible variability, by purposefully selecting one school considered "urban" and one school considered "rural." Also, there was an original plan to create a comparative study between an urban and rural district and to compare educators' interpretations and perceptions towards the FLE policy. However, after numerous attempts to seek approval from several Virginia elementary schools within various districts, I was only able to obtain permission from one school.

In total, I originally sought twelve school districts that varied between urban and rural within the state but tried to make them within proximity of each other to enhance the possibility for a comparative analysis. Once I received IRB approval, I attempted to gain permission and entry into each school district by emailing the school or district's designated contact point with an introductory email. This email introduced myself, the research study, and what would be needed from the school for successful research. Unfortunately, most of the school districts did not reply to my introductory email, even after double checking it was sent to the correct email, personal, and department. Out of the twelve school districts, I only heard back from three. Two of these districts I heard from did not grant permission due to the "sensitive nature" of the research. One district, an urban school district, I received permission from and was more than willing to accommodate and participate.

What first appeared to be a disappointing limitation, the situation was made beneficial by reconceptualizing the methodology as a case study. Developing the

methodology as a case study with a critical policy analysis was a different approach to gather qualitative research. In fact, utilizing a case study with a critical policy analysis allowed for more perceptive interview responses, additional insights, and allowed for interpretation of the data I might not have otherwise noticed because I conducted this research using different qualitative methods.

This case was considered urban in the sense that in such a small location there were a larger population of residents that maintained a diversity in race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and overall culture. Figure 2 below shows the percent enrollment by demographics within the elementary school itself as well as the overall student population within the school district. In a sense this particular area and school is a good example of a microcosm of American schools and residents in terms of its growing population and diversity. Even though it was considered urban, drive a mile or so out of the city limits in any direction and you would be in more rural, farmland areas. Politically speaking, this urban city is a considered liberal while all surrounding and neighboring suburban and rural counties are conservative (Virginia Department of Elections, 2017). This urban school district is also situated between two major metropolitan areas.

Within the urban elementary school itself, the total population of teachers employed are 60, allowing a student, teacher ratio of 15.02, which is a little higher than the district average of 13.42 (NCES, 2017). Within this population of educators, 32% possess their Bachelor's degree, 67% possess their Master's degree, and 1% have a different type of degree (VDOE, 2017). As a district, 40% possess their Bachelor's

degree, 56% possess their Master's degree, 2% have a doctoral degree, and 2% have a different degree (VDOE, 2017).

Table 2 below shows the overall population of Urban Elementary School by grade level. Please note that this school in particular is only Kindergarten through second grade and is the only school with these grade levels in the entire city school district thus why the population of students per grade level is high. The number of classrooms is also provided to correlate with the student, teacher ratio.

Table 2

Enrollment at Urban Elementary School by Grade 2016 – 2017.

Grade	Population	Number of Classrooms
Kindergarten	298	17
Grade 1	270	14
Grade 2	283	15
Total Students	851	46

Source: http://schoolquality.virginia.gov

Also, Figure 2 below compares the demographics of Urban Elementary School to the school district overall to display the similarities and differences. The graph shows that the overall percentage in demographics consisting of race and ethnicity were fairly similar to each other. In both the school and district, students who were black had the highest percent in population followed by white and Hispanic. Urban Elementary School is also a Title I school, however has remained fully accredited consistently with its fellow schools for the past three years in a row (VDOE, 2017).
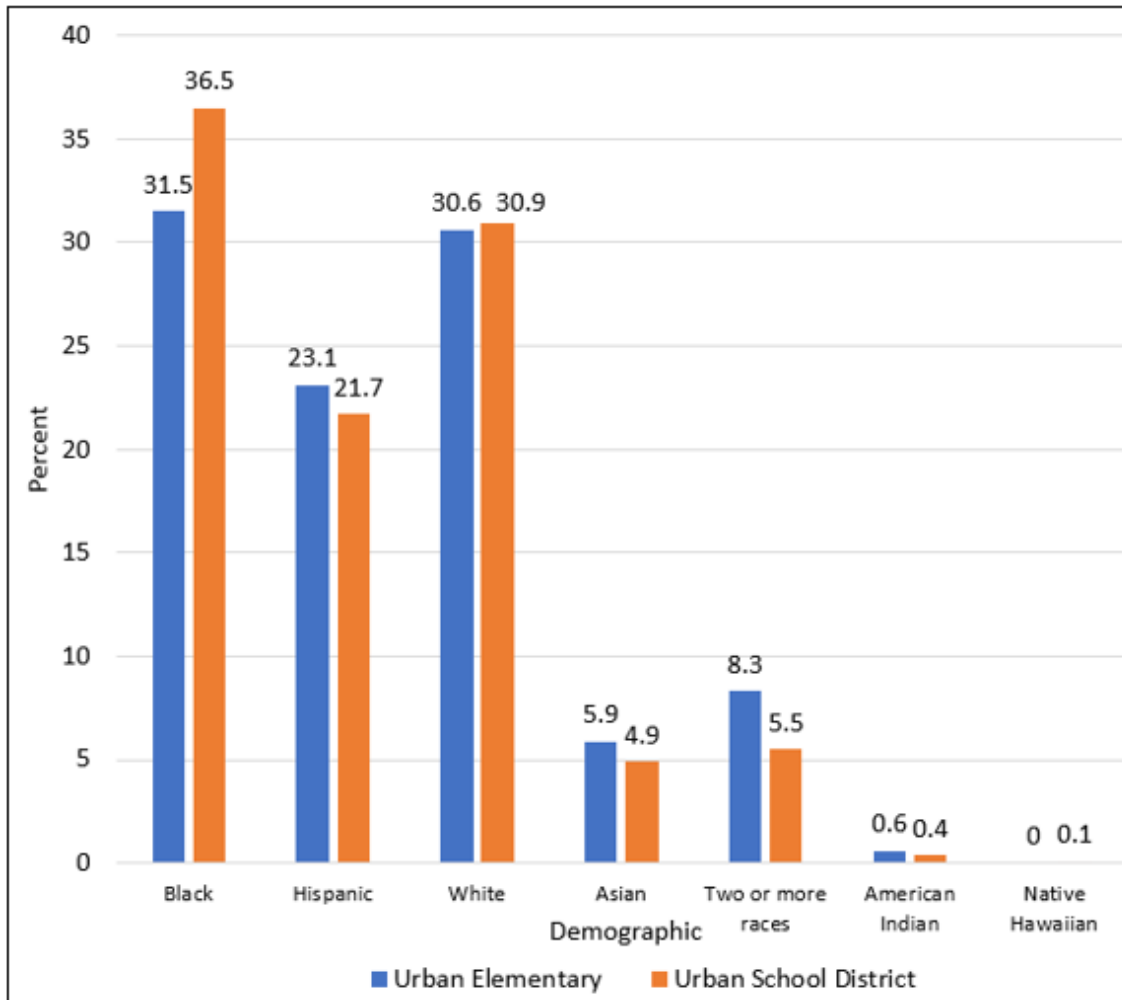
Figure 2: Percent Enrollment by Demographics 2016-*2017*
Source: http://schoolquality.virginia.gov

After Urban Elementary School had been agreed upon with district personnel and

VCU IRB, the participants were selected by a combination of random and convenience

sampling. That is, all teachers within the school had an equal opportunity to participate in

the study, but whomever agreed to participate became the convenience sample.

Table 3.

Characteristics for research study.		
School	Characteristics	Number of Participants
Urban Elementary School		
	Certification & Licensure	
	Administrator	2
	School Counselor	2
	Elementary Education Teacher	4
	FLE Certified Teacher	2

As Table 3 above indicates, I interviewed two administrators, two school counselors, four elementary education classroom teachers (not certified to teach FLE), and two FLE certified teachers that currently teach Health and Family Life Education to the student population. It is important to note that the two counselors who participated represent 100% of counselors assigned to this school. While I was only able to interview two of three administrators, one absence was due to a long-term medical leave and not a refusal to participate. Taken together, eight out of ten participants were female and all participants were white or Caucasian.

I intentionally excluded elementary school students from the study interviews due to the age of the students and potentially sensitive nature of the study. As part of my recruitment plan, designated members within the district offices were contacted. I described my dissertation research so individuals understood the purposes and nature of the study and what would be needed of their district. The goal was to receive consent from administrators, counselors, and teachers in an elementary school as participants. I was fortunate to have achieved this goal. After gaining consent from both VCU IRB and the district office, I contacted the principal at Urban Elementary School. First, the

principal and I set up a time to meet in person to discuss my research, goals, and how I would be reaching out to the school faculty. I explained intentions to set up a time to interview participants individually and anonymously by sending an introductory email to the school's educators (administrators, counselors, and teachers) to see how many responded to the invitation. The initial introductory email was sent out to the school faculty which can be referred to in the Appendices.

Once I heard from all interested educators, there were not more than the necessary number of teachers willing and able to participate, therefore I selected all who expressed interest in participating. After individually contacting interested participants, I described the observation and interview processes and answered any questions they had. Participants were informed they could quit the study at any time without negative ramifications. They also signed an informed consent document and was assured that their answers and responses would never be associated with their identities to maintain privacy. During the entire interview, observation, and time spent within the case and school, all participants remained actively engaged throughout the duration of the data collection. None of the study's participants backed out of the study at any time. All remained involved and interested during the entire process.

It is necessary to note here that even though my research was done using a critical advocacy approach, I aimed to bridle my opinions and beliefs, refraining from displaying emotions or reacting on participants' contributions. All of personal feelings was bridled throughout the entire data collection process with participants. In fact, during the interview process, one participant did ask me about my own thoughts and I had to tell them I could not share that information with them.

Table 4.

Participant background information.

Participant	Location Grew Up	Year Graduated from High School	College Location
Heather	North East	1999	Out of State
Jamie	East Coast	1985	Out of State
Colleen	Midwest	2000	Out of State
Juliet	Virginia	1976	Virginia
Lisa	Virginia (locally)	1987	Virginia
Samantha	Virginia (locally)	2007	Virginia
Amanda	Virginia	1978	Virginia
Monica	Midwest	1965	Virginia
Tobias	Virginia	2008	Virginia
Terrence	Virginia (locally)	2004	Virginia

Table 4 displays some of this participant background information to understand how many participants were originally from Virginia, located locally, and out of state. Furthermore, Table 4 displays the years participants graduated from high school along with their college location. This also helped to determine how many of the educators attended college in Virginia and how many were out of state. Understanding who grew up and went to college in Virginia is important towards this study since this is a critical policy analysis about Virginia's DOE FLE policy and I was curious if it made a difference or impacted the data results if educators received their education within Virginia. Out of all the participants, three received their college education outside of Virginia. However, one of the three participants received their master's degree in Virginia. Figure 3 also identifies participant background information and characteristics by displaying a range of the years of educator experience between participants. Please note all names provided throughout this study are pseudonyms to protect the identity of each participant. The following subsections introduce us to each participant to

understand their educational role in the school, educational background, certifications, and years of experience.
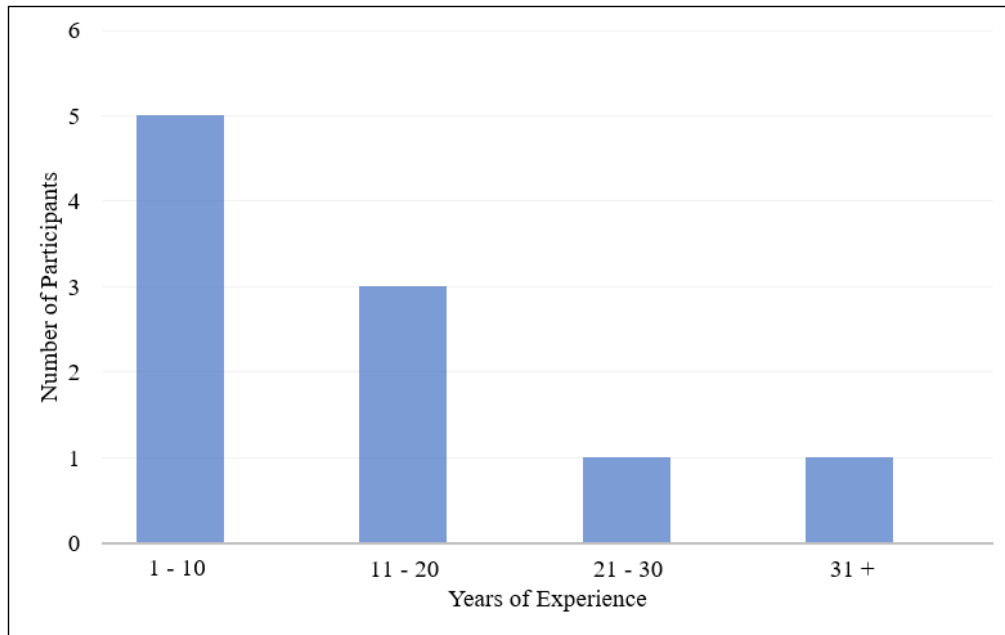
Figure 3: Range of Years of Experience with Number of Participants

Heather. Heather is currently a second grade teacher at Urban Elementary School. She grew up in a northeastern state as well as east coast states. After graduating from high school in 1999, she attended college in a university outside of Virginia and closer to where she grew up. She obtained a bachelor's degree and teaching certification in elementary education for grades Kindergarten through sixth. Currently, she has been an educator in the public school system for nine years.

Jamie. Jamie is currently a first grade teacher at Urban Elementary School. Jamie grew up, graduated from high school in 1985, and attended college in her home state on the east coast. In all, Jamie has 29 years of teaching experience! Out of all 29 years, 27 have been at this current elementary school in Virginia. Jamie's highest level

of education is a bachelor's degree in education. Her current certification is both early childhood and elementary from nursery school through fourth grade.

Colleen. Colleen comes to this school district from the farthest out of all participants. She grew up and attended college in the Midwest and graduated from high school in 2000. Colleen had a double major in college earning her a bachelor's degree in health and physical education. Moreover, she has a certification to teach health for grades sixth through high school, has a certification to teach physical education throughout grades Kindergarten through twelfth, and is Family Life Certified. Colleen has spent her entire teaching career at this school and has been an educator for 11 years.

Juliet. Spending only a few years growing up in the Midwest, Juliet spent most of her childhood in Virginia and graduated high school within Virginia in 1976. After graduating high school, Juliet attended a college in Virginia where she obtained both her bachelor and master degrees. Besides being certified to teaching elementary education for grades Kindergarten through sixth, she also possesses an administration and supervision certification for grades Kindergarten through twelfth. However, her current position is teaching first grade. In all, Juliet has been an educator for 18 years.

Lisa. Lisa is a school counselor who is not only from Virginia but grew up in the local vicinity and attended college within Virginia as well. After graduating from high school in 1987, Lisa attended college to obtain a certification within pupil personnel services in order to be a school counselor for grades Pre-Kindergarten through twelfth. Her highest level of education is a master's degree in counseling and human development. In all, Lisa has been a school counselor for eight years within this district.

Samantha. Also a school counselor, Samantha is native to Virginia and graduated from high school locally in 2007. She went to two different colleges in Virginia in order to obtain both her bachelor and master degrees. Samantha's master degree is in school counseling and she is also certified to be a school counselor like Lisa. Samantha has been a school counselor for three years. Out of all the participants, she possessed the least amount of years as an educator, but after interviewing her, you would have thought she had been doing it much longer.

Amanda. As one of the school administrators at Urban Elementary School, Amanda carries a diversity in her experiences as an educator. After graduating from high school in 1978 in Virginia, she also attended college in Virginia. However, after many life changes, marriage, and family raising, she has been an elementary educator and attended other colleges throughout the country. In all, Amanda has accrued a master's degree in Administration & Supervision plus an additional 62 credit hours. She has been an administrator within Urban Elementary School for seven years.

Monica. Monica is another administrator at Urban Elementary School. Out of all the participants, Monica possesses the most amount of years as an educator. She grew up in a Midwestern state and graduated from high school in 1965. Monica then attended college in Virginia where she also began her teaching career as an elementary school teacher. She has a master's degree in education in order to be certified to teach Kindergarten through sixth grade as well as certification within administration and supervision. In all, Monica has 35 years of experience as an educator!

Tobias. As one of two male participants in this study, he is currently a second grade teacher. He grew up and graduated from high school in 2008 in Virginia, but not

locally. Tobias did attend college in Virginia as well in order to become certified to teach

elementary education for grades Kindergarten through sixth. Currently, Tobias attends

graduate school in Virginia within the field of educational technology. Tobias began his

teaching career at Urban Elementary School and has been teaching there for five years.

   Terrence. Lastly, Terrence another Virginia resident who grew up and graduated

high school in 2004 locally. He also attended college within Virginia to receive his

bachelor's degree and be endorsed in Health and Physical Education for grades

Kindergarten through twelfth. Furthermore, Terrence is also certified to teach Family

Life within grades Kindergarten through twelfth. In all, Terrence has been an educator

for five years.

Data Collection

   Besides acting as the researcher for this qualitative study, according to Merriam

(2009), I was also the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Specific

collection tools or methods included document analysis, interviews, field observations,

field notes, and journaling. Utilizing various forms of data collection enhanced

variability, strengthened believability, and provided triangulation to the research

(LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 2009). Moreover,

all forms of data collection had rich description which is "using words and pictures rather

than numbers" to express what has been learned (Merriam, 2009, p. 16). Rich description

was demonstrated using extensive quotation and description of artifacts, observations,

and interviews. This helped me find areas that overlapped, had reoccurring themes, and

signaled data saturation (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 2009).

Data collection was in the form of field notes, observations, journaling, document analysis, and interviews. All interviews were semi-structured and conducted face-to-face with each participant. By conducting interviews face-to-face, I analyzed and journaled potentially deeper information, facial expressions, and reactions towards interview questions better than if conducted by phone, for example (Merriam, 2009). Having semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility and openness to discuss more (Merriam, 2009). All participants perceived to have no problems if I temporarily deviated from the original interview questions with other open-ended questions relating the research, case, FLE, or Standards of Learning. Doing so allowed to gain more rich description for data collection and allowed me to further understand participants' interpretations, perceptions, opinions, and backgrounds.

All participant interviews were transcribed for coding with ATLAS.ti. Participants for interviews included certified FLE teachers, classroom teachers not involved in teaching FLE, counselors, and administrators. To strengthen privacy, I offered to hold interviews in neutral, off-site locations. This agrees with Margaret Somerville (2012) when she writes about the critical power of place (where to conduct interviews) and how it can be crucial in forming a connection, meaning making, and cultural context during the research. However, even though this was offered to each participant, all felt the most comfortable having their interviews conducted on school grounds. Therefore, each interview was conducted in a room that was locked so as not to be disturbed during the interview. A pseudonym was used during interview transcription and quoting individuals within the study. This aided in ensuring confidentiality and

established a rapport with the participants. All approved IRB interview protocols for administrators, counselors, and teachers can be referred to in the Appendices.

This was the first time I have conducted qualitative research using ATLAS.ti. Overall, I did find this technology and software helpful to use to transcribe and code the data. However, after the interviews were transcribed, I chose to code all interviews by hand and on paper without using software. I decided to do both procedures because I felt it helped me be more thorough in my research, resulting in richer description and more confidence in my interpretations. For instance, when coding on ATLAS.ti I was able to find features and code certain aspects I may have missed coding by hand and vice versa. I did prefer to use both the program and by hand simultaneously as to not miss anything within my data analysis. Furthermore, I liked how I was able to piece items together and make graphs, timelines, or charts using ATLAS.ti once items were all coded and a codebook was established in the program.

The observations took place within the classroom setting in order to maintain students' everyday routine and natural setting. Similar to the interviews, Somerville's (2012) discussion of the critical power of place (location of observations) helped build knowledge, cultural context, and meaning making. Similarly, Yanow (2000) explains the importance of a built space (classroom décor, furniture, desk arrangements, materials, etc.) and how meaning and interpretation can also be communicated through that. While I performed a classroom observation, I was a complete observer which meant I did not interact with any of the individuals in the classroom so as not to tamper with the environment (Merriam, 2009). During my observations, I took field notes of the overall environment, both the physical aspects as well as the emotional ones, and I observed the

participants, conversations, activities, and lessons. I also journaled as a way to help me

focus, be attentive, document my impressions, and reflect on the research in order to

provide richer description and details to the study. In other words, I took field notes while

simultaneously observing. A short period after an observation was completed; I added to

my existing notes all I could remember as well as documented reactions, a form of

tentative interpretation, in a quiet and private location. I also took the time to document

potential ideas on specific things to observe in the future, as well as any questions that

may linger (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Merriam, 2009). Lastly, a management system

was created to organize and safeguard all notes and documents, which will be discussed

later in the chapter.

In order to successfully dissect Virginia's FLE policy: Family Life Education:

Board of Education Guidelines and Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools,

document analysis and several artifacts were purposefully utilized as qualitative data

sources. Document analysis is interpreting meaning of printed data such as newspaper

articles and policies for qualitative research and data collection (Yanow, 2000). Yanow

(2000) describes artifacts as physical pieces, which give language and meaning to the

actual policy. The most important artifact used was Virginia's Family Life Education:

Board of Education Guidelines and Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools

(all available on VDOE's website). The sections, the *Code of Virginia* for Family Life

Education, Board of Education Guidelines, and Standards of Learning Objectives and

Descriptive Statements are discussed in chapter four where the first three research

questions are discussed, analyzed, and answered. Please note all pieces were accessible

to the public. The Commonwealth of Virginia created and passed their Standards of

Learning and curriculum for FLE in 1987 for grades Kindergarten through 12 in public schools (VDOE, 2016). The curriculum began being implemented in schools for the 1989-1990 school year.

Regarding document analysis, I analyzed Virginia's FLE SOLs within the elementary grade levels that I researched. I was fortunate to have multiple teachers within the same grade levels as participants. This allowed me to code and find discourses within the FLE for that specific grade level. I also utilized the website to the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to look up documents regarding Urban Elementary School that was analyzed for the case study.

Data Analysis

As stated in the research design, the findings from this research were examined with a leadership for social justice lens (LSJ) (as defined by feminist and queer theorists). With regards to gender identity and sexual orientation, QT is related to feminism on the issue of women's rights. Using social justice, queer theory, and feminism together enabled a critical examination of the discourses and silences within FLE (Fischer, 2003). Specifically, the sections, the *Code of Virginia* for Family Life Education, Board of Education Guidelines, and Standards of Learning Objectives and Descriptive Statements were analyzed through the lenses of critical advocacy utilizing a LSJ, QT, and feminism within the document analysis.

Discourse analysis. A discourse is, "the way reality is perceived through and shaped by historically and socially constructed within specific social conditions and relations of power" (Leistyna, 2012, p. 202). Fischer (2003) describes the goal of discourse analysis is to, "show how these [verbal statements, historical events,

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interviews, ideas, politics] actions, objects, and practices are socially meaningful and that these meanings are shaped by the social and political struggles in specific historical periods” (p. 73). Discourse analysis was used not only in the data analysis but also in the research methodology or plan of action which identified societal or political power struggles within the realm of teaching and learning gender and sexuality (Crotty, 1998; Fischer, 2003). Educators’ perspectives could be potentially revealed by listening to oral discourse and rereading written discourse. Field notes also provided another avenue to examine discourses and silences. Doing all the above-mentioned helped analyze potential patterns discovered in the research. Besides discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis further analyzed the collected data.

      Critical discourse analysis. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) builds from the discourse analysis tradition by using critical theory as a tool for sharper focus. Thus, CDA enables the researcher to go further than discourse analysis by analyzing language within socio political power and oppression struggles (Fischer, 2003; Schieble, 2012). CDA was useful to look at the language used not only by the sample participants but also the language within the SOLs and related documents. Fischer (2003) claims, “Critical theory also speaks directly to the question of how to rethink the technocratic practices of policymaking” and helps to “shape policy analysis to show how this conception is inherently connected to normative questions” (p. 37). As stated earlier, the specific theoretical lenses that were used to examine findings with a critical focus included leadership for social justice (LSJ), feminist theory (FT), and queer theory (QT). The goal of utilizing LSJ, QT, and feminism in educational research was to challenge traditional heteronormative standards and move the field toward progressive change.

Leadership for social justice. Researchers Cambron-McCabe and McCarthy (2005) emphasize that LSJ entails, "moral values, justice, respect, care, and equity; always in the forefront is a consciousness about the impact of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability on schools and students' learning" (p. 203). This means it is necessary for an educator to also be a leader for social justice in order to promote equality and success for all students regardless of any form of diversity. For the purposes of this research, LSJ focused on school equity in terms of gender and sexual orientation. LSJ was utilized throughout every step of the qualitative research process especially within interviews, observations, and document analysis. Within this aspect of the research design the LSJ lens helped understand educators' perspectives about teaching/learning gender and sexuality in elementary schools. Also, LSJ helped determine any equity issues within the documents such as Virginia's SOLs for Family Life Education as well as current school curricula.

Feminist theory. Michael Crotty (1998) explains that feminism is making meaning and sense of the world in different ways. It does not necessarily have to be in favor of the female mystique (Crotty, 1998). For the purpose of this research, feminist theory (FT), was used with regards to discussion and analysis of gender and sexual equality, gender stereotyping, and bias. Crotty (1998) informs researchers about the multiple types and definitions of feminism. Throughout the literature review and qualitative data collection, the lens and perspective of feminism allowed all data analysis to be looked at more critically in terms of identifying gender norms, stereotypes (looking or acting too masculine or feminine), socio-cultural expectations, and ramifications for being gender non-conforming. Lastly, I used FT to capture concepts of gender being a

social construct in terms of following typical gender roles and stereotypes because that is considered the norm in today's society and culture.

Queer theory. Within critical policy analysis, queer theory (QT) works to "liberate sexual minorities without falling back on essentializing assumptions that demand historically marginalized groups assimilate or leave" (Lugg & Murphy, 2014, p. 1183). Similar to feminism, queer theorists focus on diminishing gender stereotypes and supporting gender and sexual equality for all, especially those who identify as LGBTQ or gender non-conforming. Moreover, QT is critical, looking at power, oppression, and stigma (Lugg & Murphy, 2014). Since the described purpose of this research was to examine the policy discourse around teaching and learning gender and sexuality during the elementary school years, and to understand educators' perceptions concerning when and how elementary students learn these topics, QT was appropriate for this research. The QT lens was used throughout the entire qualitative research process, combined with feminist theory, in order to find discourses and patterns throughout interviews, observations, and document analysis. With regards to critical advocacy research, Lugg (2006) and Marshall and Rossman (2006) explain utilizing QT as a lens will make it difficult for the primary researcher to remain neutral on such issues of social justice therefore applying it with advocacy research is plausible. This is aligned with my previous mentions about entering this research endeavor knowing it would be hard to remain neutral therefore applying it with QT, FT, and LSJ helped to look for alternative explanations due to the level of passion I previous had entering the study. Moreover, QT with FT and LSJ allowed more insight into the fourth research question in this study regarding implications for future educational policy and practice.

Quality Standards

Once all interviews were conducted, each one was transcribed and coded for analysis. I included the entire commentary of all questions and responses during the interview process between the researcher (interviewer) and participant (interviewee) (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Transcribing occurred using a software program, ATLAS.ti, for coding purposes and member checking. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) define coding as, "organizing data into categories related to the framework and questions guiding the research so that they can be used to support analysis and interpretation" (p. 45). In qualitative research, codes are names and symbols rather than numbers (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). As the researcher, I coded each interview.

Once all interviews were transcribed into ATLAS.ti, the coding process began by doing an initial read through of each interview by reading each one line by line. As I read, if anything caught my eye and felt was important and necessary to save or code further, I made a note of it. After reading each interview line by line, I also began organizing and coding the data by interview question as well as research question. This allowed for better and multiple ways to interpret the data. All codes were listed in a codebook which is, "used for the analysis of a particular collection of data, the names of the variables that the codes represent, and a list of the kinds of items that are to be coded for each variable" (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 85). The codes created within the codebook were based on the interview questions and research question to help interpret the data for meaningful qualitative results. For example, codes were created based on participant interviews and questions I asked such as years of experience, location grew up, teaching credentials, year graduated from high school, and college(s) attended. Codes

were also created based on interview questions relating to how participants perceived and interpreted the Family Life Policy. For example, codes were created based on whether or not specific items were adequately addressed in the SOLs, levels of comprehensiveness, feeling comfortable and/or qualified, and being age appropriate. In relation to the research questions, coding took place regarding specifics as to SOLs, Family Life, and what participants felt the overall policy did or did not state.

I also conducted member checking, which entailed providing all interviewed participants a copy of their interview transcript to check for accuracy. In addition, member checking entailed making the research account available to participants to ensure my interpretations captured the meaning the participant meant to convey (Mansfield, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 2009). Every participant was given a completed copy of their interview transcript. No participants expressed any discomfort concerns with their interview transcripts.

Similar to the management system I created to store and access field notes and journaling, I also organized hard copies of the interviews and used these records to chunk the data (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). I created an index bin or catalog that is labeled and categorized interview transcripts, coding analysis, field notes, journaling, artifacts, and documents. All were stored in a safe but accessible location for safeguarding data (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

Lastly, trustworthiness was maintained throughout the entire qualitative process as standards for good research practice and ethical mindfulness (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Trustworthiness demanded credibility (inner validity), transferability (external

validity, rich description, maximum variation), and dependability (reliability) (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Member-checking played a major role in this process.

Assumptions and Limitations

As the researcher for this study, I acknowledge certain limitations existed within the research and should be addressed. For example, as stated earlier, one limitation was accessibility. When I received IRB approval, I sought several elementary schools in multiple districts, but I was unable to gather them as participants. One reason was due to the "sensitive" subject matter pertaining to my dissertation and research. For the most part, I think my area of research may have been deemed too controversial or concerning for these schools. Some districts and/or schools simply did not respond to my inquiries.

Another limitation was my close familiarity of the researched school district and school as I currently have personal and professional connections. It could be that participants chose to disclose only that information they felt I might approve of. However, it did seem that knowing who I was beforehand, observing my professionalism and dedication towards my research, and trusting the promised confidentiality with the IRB protocol, participants may have actually shared more with me than they may have with strangers. I believe most participants were open and honest during their interviews.

While acknowledging the above, I also come to the setting with the assumption that participants acted authentically and answered as accurately as they could. The mere presence of the observer, while not a participant, might still influence participants' (teacher's pedagogical; student's behavior) choices.

Conclusion

       The qualitative approaches presented within this chapter provided the possibility of richer data to better understand if and how gender and sexuality issues were taught and learned in a Virginia elementary school. In the current political climate, LGBTQ rights will most likely continue to be at the forefront of discourses in the public sphere. Thus, similar to other national interests of the past, teaching/learning gender/sexuality in schools will most likely grow in prominence over the next several years. This also points to a growing need for purposeful, ethical research on the connections between identity politics, state standards, and on the ground realities in schools. This research was a first step toward understanding how these issues play out in elementary schools. Conducting this research with a critical and activist stance (Lugg, 2006) was essential to probing the policy, curricular, and educator discourses that influenced educators' perceptions, understandings, leadership, and emotions. Perhaps, most importantly, this research stood imperative in light of the continued hostility LGBTQ students face in American public schools. I agree with Lugg and Murphy (2014): *It may be a matter of life or death.*

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to share the findings gleaned through the coded interviews, document analysis, field notes, and observations. To share what I learned, each research question will be analyzed to provide more insight on the discourses regarding teaching and learning about gender and sexuality within elementary school grades Kindergarten through second.

The first research question being analyzed is regarding policy discourse. Here, the *Code of Virginia* for Family Life Education, Board of Education (BOE) Guidelines, and the Descriptive Statements from the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs) will be analyzed. The second research question on educators' perceptions and policy interpretations will be examined. Data collected via interviews along with a description of the case work together to better understand elementary educators' perception towards teaching and learning Family Life as well as how they personally interpret the FLE SOLs. The third research question will be taking the first and second research questions to the next level with comparing the policy discourse with educators' perceptions. Lastly, the fourth research question about implications of findings for future educational policy and practice will only be briefly mentioned in this chapter and will be discussed in greater detail in chapter six where findings are interpreted applying critical discourse analysis, critical policy analysis, queer theory, and critical advocacy research.

Part I: The Policy Discourse

The purpose of this section is to share the findings of the first research question: *What is the policy discourse around teaching and learning about gender and sexuality during the elementary school years, as maintained by Virginia Department of Education? For example, what is the actual policy language? Did the VDOE include interpretive guidelines of the policy? Do the Standards of Learning align with policy language? How does the family life curriculum treat issues of gender and sexual identity?* To answer this question, a thorough critical policy analysis occurred using the *Code of Virginia* for Family Life Education, Board of Education Guidelines, and the Descriptive Statements or SOLs. The critical policy analysis will help determine whether the SOLs and actual policy are aligned. Document analysis, interviews, observations, and field notes will be analyzed here as well. Lastly, I will use document analysis, the SOLs, interviews, observations, and field notes to discuss whether or not the SOLs for FLE address specific issues regarding gender and sexuality.

Code of Virginia for Family Life Education

When approaching the section for the *Code of Virginia* for Family Life Education, there is no introductory paragraph or section telling us what *Family Life* means. Instead, the *Code of Virginia* section delves right into two policies, which are used as subsections: 22.1-207.1 - Family Life Education as the overall curriculum and 22.1-207.2 - Parental Rights regarding involvement and knowledge of materials (VDOE, 2016). The *Code of Virginia* does not include any pictures or images. The only parts that are highlighted by being bolded are the names and policy numbers for both subsections. Both subsections can be referred to in the Appendices where the Family Life Education Board of

Education Guidelines and Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools are included.

Subsection 22.1-207.1: FLE curriculum. The first paragraph is a brief but detailed summary about the FLE curriculum. It addresses maintaining a curriculum that is comprehensive and age appropriate. It also lists necessary topics of discussion such as marriage and human sexuality. The Virginia DOE describes FLE in terms of such curriculum guidelines; however, it lacks a concrete definition of what they believe FLE is.

Virginia's SOLs for Family Life Education describes the curriculum. According to the Virginia Board of Education, their curriculum guidelines include:

Instruction as appropriate for the age of the student in family living and community relationships; the benefits, challenges, responsibilities, and value of marriage for men, women, and children, and communities; abstinence education; the value of postponing sexual activity; the benefits of adoption as a positive choice in the event of an unwanted pregnancy; human sexuality; human reproduction; dating violence; the characteristics of abusive relationships; steps to take to avoid sexual assault, and the availability of counseling and legal resources, and, in the event of such sexual assault, the importance of immediate medical attention and advice, as well as the requirements of the law; the etiology, prevention and effects of sexually transmitted diseases; and mental health education and awareness. (VDOE, 2016, p. 2)

When the VDOE describes their FLE curriculum, marriage is mentioned in a positive fashion, but it fails to describe if their interpretation of marriage is only between

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a man and woman or if they plan to acknowledge same-sex marriages. Moreover, human sexuality is not defined within this paragraph as to what it specifically means. Rather, the term is sandwiched between abstaining from sexual activity and human reproduction. As a discourse, one might assume human sexuality here is meant to be between and man and a woman since they are already listed within the paragraph and does digress. Again, depending on the educator's perception, this could hinder teaching and learning both gender and sexuality to students.

As mentioned, the term, "abstinence education" is used when teaching human sexuality. The VDOE (2016) defines this as "means an educational or motivational component which has as its exclusive purpose teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by teenagers' abstaining from sexual activity before marriage" (p. 2). Discussion of sexuality ends with abstinence rather than include the importance of making good choices related to sexual activity in terms of different forms of contraception. Lastly, concerning gender, the *Code of Virginia* does not use male, female, or the word gender within their vocabulary. They state *men and women.* When teaching and learning about gender, this omission can be viewed as a heteronormative discourse as it does not deconstruct gender or binary language nor does it state additional possibilities such as transgender or intersex, for example.

According to the VDOE (2016) the policy is meant to, "promote parental involvement, foster positive self-concepts and provide mechanisms for coping with peer pressure and the stresses of modern living according to the students' developmental stages and abilities" (p. 2). In terms of teaching and learning about gender and sexuality there is certainly potential and opportunity here for the *Code of Virginia* and the VDOE

to go into more detail about modern living, students' abilities, and positive self-concepts; however, anything related to being non-heteronormative or non-conforming is missing from the written discourse altogether.

Subsection 22.1-207.2: Parental rights. This subsection informs parents or guardians of Virginia public school students of their right to access the FLE curriculum and materials and includes language around how it is the job of each specific school district to summarize their FLE program for parents as well as promote parental guidance and involvement (VDOE, 2016). Even though policy states that school districts are required to promote FLE and the curriculum, there is a lack of constructive information that parents/guardians may find helpful. For example, instead of explaining possible benefits such as acquiring knowledge of and having a positive educational experience with FLE for students, it simply states parents have the right to view and access materials as well as to choose to exclude their child from the state's FLE.

The Virginia Board of Education, describes the right of parents to review certain materials thus:

> Every parent, guardian or other person in the Commonwealth having control or charge of any child who is required by § 22.1-254 A to send such child to a public school shall have the right to review the complete family life curricula, including all supplemental materials used in any family life education program. A complete copy of all printed materials and a description of all audio-visual materials shall be kept in the school library or office and made available for review to any parent or guardian during school office hours before and during the

school year. The audio-visual materials shall be made available to parents for review, upon request, on the same basis as printed materials are made available.

Each school board shall develop and the parents or guardians of a student participating in the family life education program a summary designed to assist parents in understanding the program implemented in its school division as such program progresses and to encourage parental guidance and involvement in the instruction of the students. Such information shall reflect the curricula of the program as taught in the classroom. (VDOE, 2016, p. 2-3)

This section is straight forward for parents to read and understand. However, mentioning parental guidance and involvement in the instruction is vague in terms of how parents can specifically be involved and provide guidance as needed. For example, teaching and learning about gender and sexuality might also include parents' personal opinions and set of beliefs which may or may not agree with how their local school interprets and teaches these pieces. Another part within this section that could inhibit teaching and learning gender and sexuality in general is allowing parents the option to opt their child out of the FLE curriculum.

Board of Education Guidelines

Board of Education Guidelines are presented as two parts. The first part lists the approved FLE program and the second part discusses how locally, school districts can develop their FLE curriculum according to the provided guidelines. Both parts are listed as lettered and numbers sections. Please note, all discussion regarding the Board of Education or Board of Education Guidelines are part of the VDOE and FLE state policy unless otherwise noted.

Board of education's approved family life education program. Part One of the BOE Guidelines begins with, "The following guidelines shall be followed in the implementation of the Board of Education's approved Family Life Education program" (VDOE, 2016, p. 9). Following this quote are 12 lettered sections discussing what school districts are required to have and utilize and what the curriculum should include for successful teaching and learning of FLE. Even though the information is presented in an organized fashion, pieces within it possess a policy discourse around teaching and learning about gender and sexuality.

The 12 lettered sections within the BOE's approved family life education program are as follows:

A. A community involvement team, or school health advisory board, shall be identified and should include individuals such as a person from the central office, an elementary school principal, a middle school principal, a high school principal, teachers, a school board member, parents, one or more members of the clergy, a member of the medical profession, and others in the community.

B. There must be evidence of broad-based community involvement and an annual opportunity for parents and others to review curriculum and instructional materials prior to the beginning of actual instruction.

C. Those individuals selected by the localities to teach the Family Life Education program shall participate in the training program sponsored by the Department of Education.

D. Medical professionals and mental health professionals may be involved, where appropriate, to help teach the content of the Family Life Education curriculum and to serve as a resource to students and to parents.

E. Local training and follow-up activities shall involve the community in understanding and implementing the Family Life Education program.

F. Local agencies/organizations/support systems shall be identified and used as resources for the Family Life Education program.

G. An "opt-out" procedure shall be provided to ensure communication with the parent or guardian for permission for students to be excused from all or part of the program.

H. A plan for teaching sensitive content in gender-separated classes shall be announced publicly.

I. The Family Life Education Standards of Learning objectives approved by the Board of Education shall be used by the local school board. However, local school divisions may reassign the grade designation of the Standards of Learning objectives within grades K-6. The grade designation for objectives within grades 7-12 may be reassigned only one grade level, up or down. Also, the program may be adopted for kindergarten through grade 10 or kindergarten through grade 12; however, local scheduling of Family Life Education shall avoid any interruption or detraction from instruction in basic skills in elementary schools or in those courses required for graduation in the secondary schools.

J. The curriculum shall include education about those sections of statutory law applicable to instructional units relating to sexual conduct and misconduct and

legal provisions relating to family life. This would include using any electronic

devices to convey inappropriate behaviors and/or images.

K. The curriculum shall include mental health education and awareness as

applicable to instructional units relating to family life.

L. The curriculum shall include information outlining the benefits, challenges,

responsibilities, and value of marriage for men, women, children and

communities. (VDOE, 2016, p. 9-10)

Within these sections, it does discuss many individuals who are allowed to have

an involvement in the district curriculum implementation. This allows potential for more

people to provide their own interpretation of the policy, which could be a benefit or a

disadvantage towards teaching and learning gender and sexuality depending on individual

interpretations. It is also mentioned that schools can reassign grade designation for the

SOLs if they deem something is not age appropriate. The topic of age appropriateness

will be discussed more in-depth in another section. It does not state if there is a limit to

the number of SOLs that can be reassigned, rather only that each element may be raised

or lowered by X grade levels. The Board of Education's guidelines does not stipulate

who, within the local school divisions, has the power for such reassignment.

Interestingly enough, FLE SOLs are the only SOLs within Virginia that allow grade

reassignment for questions of grade level appropriateness.

Similar to the *Code of Virginia*, the BOE Guidelines, also uses men and women

for marital benefits. How would a student who does not define themselves as a man or

woman be represented here? Or, how would a student who knows a family member who

does not define themselves as a man or woman be represented? How would you teach

this to a student who possesses a non-heteronormative family structure?

The only time gender was used was to describe how some of the sensitive content

would be taught in gender separated classes (VDOE, 2016). The BOE Guidelines fail to

define or list what sensitive subjects are. Also, if a student is considered transgender or

does not define themselves by a gender at all, where would that student go for that

lesson? How will their perspectives be heard or discussed? Lastly, similarly to the *Code*

of Virginia, the binary language indicating "men and women" does not refer to alternative

identity categories.

Family life education program developed locally. Part Two of the BOE

Guidelines begins with, "The following guidelines shall be followed in the

implementation of the Family Life Education program developed locally" (VDOE, 2016,

p. 10). Similar to Part One, there are two lettered sections but each possessing 14

numbered subsections to include more detail and information. The first lettered section

regards comprehensiveness and inclusivity. The second is about developing and adhering

to the policy and guidelines.

Comprehensive and inclusive. This is Part A in this section. The guidelines state

"The Family Life Education program developed locally shall be comprehensive and

sequential and include the following content areas and may include others at the

discretion of the local school board" (VDOE, 2016, p. 10). Part A contains 14 content

areas that the VDOE allow some local control and freedom to develop as long as the

content is comprehensive and follows the SOLs.

The content areas in Part A are:

1. Family living and community relationships;

2. The value of postponing sexual activity until marriage (abstinence education);

3. Human sexuality;

4. Human reproduction and contraception, including the benefits of adoption as a positive choice in the event of an unintended pregnancy;

5. The etiology, prevention, and effects of sexually transmitted infections;

6. Stress management and resistance to peer pressure;

7. Development of positive self-concepts and respect for others;

8. Parenting skills;

9. Substance use and abuse;

10. Child abuse;

11. Prevention of sexual assault and, in the event of sexual assault, the importance of receiving immediate medical attention and advice, knowledge of the requirements of the law, and use of resources such as counseling and legal services;

12. Dating violence and the characteristics of abusive relationships including using electronic devices to convey inappropriate images and behaviors;

13. Education about and awareness of mental health issues; and

14. The benefits of marriage. (VDOE, 2016, p. 10)

Within the listed 14 content areas, four relate most to this study's first research question, that is, content areas one, three, seven, and fourteen due to the grades K-2 focus of this project. Because of this, some content areas do not correspond to the K-2 grade

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levels, especially when discussing the policy discourse around teaching and learning about gender and sexuality during the elementary school years therefore will not be discussed further. To reiterate, the four content areas for grades K-2 are:

1. Family living and community relationships;

3. Human sexuality;

7. Development of positive self-concepts and respect for others;

14. The benefits of marriage. (VDOE, 2016, p. 10)

Being a content area within this section means the FLE program and curriculum within a Virginia school district can plan and develop as necessary in such areas as long as they are aligned with Virginia SOLs and follow the *Code of Virginia*. The listed quote in the beginning of Part A seems it can be used as a "loophole" by the VDOE and local school districts. For example, while the guidelines may not specifically list non-heteronormative family structures or discuss different gender or sexual identities, the local school board are allowed to make these alterations based on this guideline. This loophole might also be used as an excuse to avoid teaching about alternative family and individual identities out of fear of negative criticism from the community.

Include and adhere. This section begins as, "The Family Life Education program developed locally shall include and adhere to the following" (VDOE, 2016, p. 11). This means the items listed here are directives. Contrary to the prior section, this one does not mention anything pertaining to including other topics or materials. Also, contrary to the first section, every listed item is related to elementary education. This is because this section does not have content areas. Instead, it is a list of elements a school district must have in order to successfully develop the FLE program.

The items that each district must include and adhere to are:

1. A community involvement team, or school health advisory board, shall be identified and should include individuals such as a person from the central office, an elementary school principal, a middle school principal, a high school principal, teachers, a school board member, parents, one or more members of the clergy, a member of the medical profession, a mental health practitioner, and others in the community.

2. There must be evidence of broad-based community involvement and an annual opportunity for parents and others to review curriculum and instructional materials prior to the beginning of actual instruction.

3. Those individuals selected by the localities to teach the local Family Life Education program shall participate in the training program sponsored by the Department of Education. The training program shall include training in instructional elements to support the various curriculum components.

4. A Family Life Education leader from each grade level shall be identified to assist in training individuals who will be teaching, to work with a community involvement team or school health advisory board, and to assist in program implementation and evaluation.

5. Medical and mental health professionals may be involved, where appropriate, to help teach the content of the Family Life Education curriculum and to serve as a resource to students and to parents.

6. Local training and follow-up activities shall involve the community in understanding and implementing the Family Life Education program.

7. Local agencies/organizations/support systems shall be identified and used as resources for the Family Life Education program.

8. An "opt-out" procedure shall be provided to ensure communication with the parent or guardian for permission for students to be excused from all or part of the program.

9. A plan for teaching sensitive content in gender-separated classes shall be announced publicly.

10. Local scheduling of Family Life Education, to include kindergarten through grade 10 or kindergarten through grade 12, shall avoid any interruption or detraction from instruction in the basic skills in the elementary schools or in those courses required for graduation in the secondary schools.

11. A local curriculum plan shall use as a reference the Family Life Education Standards of Learning objectives approved by the Board of Education and shall provide age-appropriate, medically-accurate instruction in relation to students' developmental stages and abilities.

12. The curriculum shall include education about those sections of statutory law applicable to instructional units relating to sexual conduct and misconduct and legal provisions relating to family life. This would include using any electronic devises to convey inappropriate behaviors and/or images. The information must be taught at least once during middle school and at least twice during high school.

13. The curriculum shall include mental health education and awareness as applicable to instructional units relating to family life.

14. The curriculum shall include information on the benefits, challenges, responsibilities, and value of marriage for men, women, children, and communities. (VDOE, 2016, p. 11-12)

This section does show some redundancy as these guidelines are similarly mentioned in the prior section or in the *Code of Virginia*. The redundant parts I am speaking of pertain to teaching sensitive subjects in gender separated classes, the benefits of marriage, parents' rights to view materials, and having an opt out procedure (VDOE, 2016). The items that are not redundant within this section nor have not been previously mentioned relate to teaching and learning gender and sexuality in elementary school. The elements not related to teaching sensitive subjects in gender separated classes, the benefits of marriage, parents' rights to view materials, and having an opt out procedure, are appropriately addressed to include and adhere to a Family Life program in an elementary school.

Standards of Learning Objectives and Descriptive Statements

This section will take a thorough and detailed look at the FLE SOLs for grades Kindergarten, first, and second. Since there are many SOLs within each grade level, the only ones being discussed here are those SOLs that point towards teaching/learning gender/sexuality within these grade levels. Each SOL discussed will be provided with the standard itself as well as the descriptive statement verbatim to visually comprehend the actual policy language and discourses.

Kindergarten. There is a total of 11 FLE SOLs within Kindergarten. Out of the 11, the first five SOLs are pertinent to this study.

K.1 - The student will experience success and positive feelings about self.

Descriptive Statement: These experiences are provided by the teacher through the climate of the classroom environment and include, but are not limited to, experiencing success in school, effectively handling routines, experiencing self-acceptance, and acceptance from others. Parents are encouraged to reinforce these positive experiences and feelings at home. Emphasis is placed on respect for differences. (VDOE, 2016, p. 14)

This is a great SOL for young students to understand acceptance and respect. The potential discourse here is defining what acceptance is for self and others, which is important to know how to teach, especially at the Kindergarten grade level. Regarding students learning about gender or sexuality, acceptance and respect certainly plays a role here. The SOL and descriptive statements provide no examples related to how they should accept themselves and others, nor give specifics as to why this is necessary. Lastly, it does not specifically discuss or mention non-heteronormative or nonconforming aspects of students and understanding gender stereotypes.

K.2 - The student will experience respect from and for others. Descriptive Statement: Teachers and other adults at school actively listen to and accept feelings and opinions of the child. A classroom climate that encourages positive mental health development and protects the child from physical and emotional infringements by others is provided. The child also learns and practices courtesy and good manners. (VDOE, 2016, p. 14)

Neither the SOL or the descriptive statements mention either gender or sexuality at all. Without providing examples for teachers, teachers might refrain from discussing these issues, which could hamper a safe and supportive environment for all students,

possibly leading to peer victimization.

> ***K.3 - The student will become aware of the effects of his or her behavior on others and the effects of others' behavior on himself or herself.*** Descriptive Statement: The teacher uses appropriate descriptive language to explain to a child how his or her behavior affects others positively as well as negatively. The same descriptive language is used to explain to a child the effects of others' behavior on him or her. This approach is reinforced by other school personnel and parents are encouraged to continue such explanations at home. The child is introduced to the concept of privacy, especially in the use of bathroom facilities. In addition, the importance of avoiding gossip about others' personal or family problems is stressed. Concepts concerning electronic privacy, such as not sharing your name and address over the internet, are introduced. (VDOE, 2016, p. 14)

Having an SOL at the Kindergarten level for students to understand the effect of their behavior is absolutely necessary. One sentence that stuck out to me here was the sentence pertaining to bathroom privacy. How is privacy protected in regards to gender non-conforming students or students who want to use a particular bathroom because that is how they identify? Specifics around privacy and bathroom use is not addressed it at all.

> ***K.4 - The student will recognize that everyone is a member of a family and that families come in many forms.*** Descriptive Statement: This includes a variety of family forms: two parent families; extended families or relatives other than the immediate family living in the home; single parent families; adoptive families; foster families or guardians; families with stepparents; and other blended families. (VDOE, 2016, p. 14)

This SOL about family provides a detailed list of a variety and the diversity of families however there is no mention of same-sex families or families with a non-heteronormative structure. This is a serious omission.

K.5 - The student will identify members of his or her own family. Descriptive Statement: This refers to identifying the adult and child members of the student's family. (VDOE, 2016, p. 14)

Similar to the previous SOLs about family, there lacks guidance around non-heteronormative families. For example, how should educators handle discussions around families who have two mommies, two daddies, or a gender non-conforming parent within a non-heterosexual family structure? How does a primary grade teacher address questions related to family member identification? Again, the actual language does not state how to address this.

First Grade. There is a total of 12 FLE SOLs within first grade. Out of the 12, six SOLs pertain to teaching and learning gender and sexuality.

1.1 - The student will experience continuing success and positive feelings about self. Descriptive Statement: The teacher continues to provide a classroom environment that fosters experiences of success in school work, in self-acceptance of body image, in the handling of routine situations, and in group activities. Parents are encouraged to reinforce successful experiences, self-esteem, and good mental health practices at home. (VDOE, 2016, p. 16)

This SOL for understanding acceptance and respect is similar to K.1. Again, the potential discourse here is defining what acceptance is for self and others. However, the descriptive statement does provide examples related to types of acceptance but does not

state anything related to gender or sexuality. It does not specifically discuss or mention non-heteronormative or non-conforming aspects of students or understanding gender stereotypes.

1.2 - The student will experience continuing respect from others. Descriptive Statement: Teachers and other adults at school continue active listening and acceptance of the feelings and opinions of the child, providing a classroom climate that protects the child from physical, mental and emotional infringement by others. Difficult situations, such as how to handle a bully on the playground, are discussed. (VDOE, 2016, p. 16)

This SOL is similar to the prior one as well as K.2 in terms of understanding respect and carries potential for making a classroom environment more equitable for LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students. The SOL or the descriptive statements make no mention of either gender or sexuality at all even though one example about bullying is provided. Again, without providing examples for teachers, teachers might choose to avoid these issues, which could hamper a safe and supportive environment for all students and lead to peer victimization.

1.3 - The student will become aware of the effects of his or her behavior on others and the effects of others' behavior on himself or herself. Descriptive Statement: The teacher continues to use appropriate descriptive language to explain to a child how his or her behavior affects others both positively and negatively, and how others' behavior affects him or her. The child learns to respect others and their feelings, and practices good mental health behaviors. The student is made aware of any behavior on his or her part that causes others to have

hurt feelings. (VDOE, 2016, p. 16)

This SOL is similar to K.3 (awareness of behavior and how it effects oneself and others). The difference with 1.3 is that this SOL takes the teaching and learning one step further by addressing the need to respect others and their feelings as well as understanding what can cause a hurt feeling on another individual. This SOL is necessary for young students to learn in order to understand the positive and negative effects of their behavior. The lack of clarification or understanding as to what is considered a positive or negative effect on oneself or on an individual is missing, however. The SOL or descriptive statement does not provide specific examples to help guide the teacher in a meaningful and appropriate classroom lesson and discussion. Without clarification, opens up the space to include personal opinions or beliefs to address this area of learning. For instance, how does a teacher address a behavior (either positive or negative) that relates to a child having a type of behavior, reaction, or simple awareness related to gender and sexuality? A child might express positive feelings about another individual or themselves, but a teacher may not know how to properly acknowledge this without worry of age appropriateness or student comprehension. Moreover, a teacher might fail to see this as a positive behavior due to personal beliefs and lack of clarification within the SOL and descriptive statement. Or, if a child displays a type of behavior or reaction related to gender or sexuality on themselves or others, how should a teacher first determine whether or not this is positive or negative behavior? And then, how should the teacher proceed thereafter?

1.4 - The student will develop an understanding of the importance of a family and of different family patterns. Descriptive statement: The emphasis is on the need for loving parents, or other responsible adult(s) in the family, regardless of the type of family. The student advances from awareness of family forms at the kindergarten level to understanding the importance of the family and its various forms at the first-grade level. The following family patterns are included: two parent families; extended families or relatives other than the immediate family living in the home; single parent families; adoptive families; foster families; families with stepparent; and other blended families. (VDOE, 2016, p. 16)

This first grade SOL about family provides a detailed list of a variety and the diversity of families however there is no mention of same-sex families or families with a non-heteronormative structure. If there was no list provided, one might feel the freedom to include (or exclude) family that is not part of the teacher's schema. However, the fact that a very long list *is* included but specifically leaves out non-heteronormative structures, it leaves one to conclude that "those" families are not worth mentioning.

1.5 - The student will identify family members and their responsibilities in contributing to the successful functioning of the family. Descriptive Statement: The focus is on the tasks that must be performed in order for a family to function successfully. Examples of tasks are providing food; providing shelter; providing and caring for clothing; providing money for these and other necessities; providing love and caring, including meeting the needs of elderly or physically and mentally disabled family members; and providing for fun and play. (VDOE, 2016, p. 16)

SOL 1.5 is similar to the Kindergarten SOLs about family member identification. Again, K.4 stated, "The student will recognize that everyone is a member of a family and that families come in many forms" and K.5 stated, "The student will identify members of his or her own family" (VDOE, 2016, p. 14). Within the first grade SOL, examples for parents and educators are provided including tasks to understand what a family needs to function successfully. The discourse here holds potential for gender stereotyping within family roles. The actual policy language does not discuss how to address this. Heteronormatively speaking, one positive is that it does not specifically say this is a mother or female's role and this is a father or male's role, but what if a child had two mommies, two daddies, or a gender nonconforming parent within a non-heterosexual family structure and the child asks questions related to family member identification? The actual policy language does not state how to address this, which makes discussions or questions that are gender and sexuality related vulnerable to biased discourse.

> *1.8 - The student will express his or her feelings of happiness, sadness, and anger to the teacher.* Descriptive Statement: Teachers help children on an individual basis to recognize and express their feelings of happiness, sadness, and anger. Children are assisted in dealing appropriately with their feelings. If matters of a private nature arise, teachers are urged to contact parents so they can take a team approach to individual student problems. Positive mental health practices will be utilized. (VDOE, 2016, p. 17)

This is an essential SOL pertaining to mental health and expressing one's feelings. While important to all children, this is particularly important for students who have distinctive feelings about their gender and/or sexuality or are unsure how to express

their feelings because classroom discourse is missing altogether. On the other hand, this SOL could be used to communicate with students who are victimizing others related to identity politics and could allow the teacher to understand why a student feels the way they do. However, the SOL or descriptive statements lack clarity as to why students may possess feelings of happiness, sadness, and anger. Without defining specific emotions and including context in discussions, the potential for substantive conversations around emotions as they pertain to gender identities and sexualities are hindered.

Second grade. There is a total of eight FLE SOLs within second grade. Out of the eight, four SOLs possess a policy discourse around teaching and learning gender and sexuality.

2.1 – The student will recognize that everyone has strengths and weaknesses and that all persons need to be accepted and appreciated as worthwhile.

Descriptive Statement: The key idea is that all human beings are worthwhile and need to be accepted and appreciated as they are. The emphasis is on daily experiences in which children receive the message that they are worthwhile. In this environment, the student is able to use his or her strengths to overcome weaknesses, to realize that not everyone has the same strengths and weaknesses, to change the things he or she can change, and to accept the things that cannot be changed. Care is taken to ensure that children view persons with a physical or mental disability as unique individuals with many strengths. (VDOE, 2016, p. 18)

I find this particular SOL confusing, especially in terms of addressing identity politics. The descriptive statement first expresses the need to accept and appreciate everyone as they are but a few sentences later it mentions accepting the things that cannot

be changed. This is where the subsequent discourse related to gender and sexual identity could be problematic. For example, due to personal and religious reasons, there are individuals who feel that people cannot change their sexual orientation or their gender. Rather, educators may believe sex is directly correlated with gender behaviors and that both are self-evident upon birth. However, we know based on this research, past research, the news, and social media, this is not true. People can choose to change their gender identity. People express their human sexuality in different ways. In terms of the actual language, stating to accept and appreciate everyone as they are *is* beneficial and positive for teaching and learning gender and sexuality. On the other hand, stating to accept the things that cannot be changed may confuse young children. Indeed, there are many things in life one does not have the ability to change but without specific details, examples, or guidance for teachers this will be interpreted and taught differently.

Moreover, when discussing strengths and weaknesses it does not provide examples or situations for the teacher. Without necessary guidance, it may be difficult for teachers to address peer victimization and maintain a safe and supportive environment for students who identify as LGBTQ or gender non-conforming.

2.4 - The student will become aware of the need to take responsibility for the effects of his or her behavior on others. Descriptive Statement: Through daily classroom experiences, the teacher can encourage children to express appreciation for positive peer behavior such as helping, sharing, being courteous, accepting others' opinions, and showing respect for others' possessions. When hurtful behavior occurs, children can be encouraged to make restitution by helping the victim solve the problem caused by the behavior. School personnel will use

positive mental health practices to resolve problem behavior. (VDOE, 2016, p. 17)

Similar to K.3 and 1.3, it is necessary for young students to understand how their actions and behavior affects others and how to take personal. However, there is no mention within the SOL or descriptive statement that positive or negative effects on one's behavior or consequences for neglecting to take responsibility for one's actions. This is especially evident vis-à-vis perceptions about gender and sexuality that effect personal decision making and its impact on others. Also, there are no examples provided to guide the teacher despite the fact that it would be very easy to provide sample questions and/or points to guide conversations specific to perceptions and behaviors that influence personal decision making that impacts others.

2.5 - *The student will demonstrate appropriate ways of dealing with feelings.*

Descriptive Statement: Pleasant feelings (for example, those associated with success and praise) and unpleasant feelings (for example, those resulting from anger, rejection, isolation, and failure) are discussed. The student will begin to understand the characteristics of appropriate and inappropriate behavior as it relates to relationships. The concept of virtual relationships will be introduced. Appropriate behavior, in response to pleasant and unpleasant feelings, is practiced in pretend situations so that these desirable strategies are available when needed in real life situations. (VDOE, 2016, p. 17)

This is a necessary SOL that is related to 1.8 for dealing with feelings. This is certainly important for students who have different feelings about their gender or their sexuality and are unsure how to express such feelings. Moreover, discussing unpleasant

feelings is important for students who have been victims to homophobic victimization. However, there are no specifics within the SOL or descriptive statements mentioning feelings about gender or sexuality therefore a teacher might have difficulty addressing this. A major weakness of this standard is its lack of attention to cyber bullying as this has been the platform of choice for those seeking to harm gender non-conforming students.

*2.8 - **The student will be conscious of how commercials use our emotions to make us want products.*** Descriptive Statement: Children are introduced to the concept of media influences, which is developed further at higher grade levels. The students are given examples of techniques used by the media to create excitement and a desire to purchase products. Students will begin to understand how the media affects mental health issues such as self-esteem or body image. (VDOE, 2016, p. 18)

This SOL and descriptive statement differs than any other SOL within the K-2 curriculum. When discussing emotions that can be created through commercials, there is opportunity to discuss gender stereotypes and share non-heterosexual or non-conforming examples of sexual identities that may or may not be portrayed in commercials. However, the SOL or descriptive statement does not discuss or mention any of this. Without specificity, it is doubtful most teachers would address this point sufficiently or at all.

SOL and Policy Alignment

This section will discuss the *Code of Virginia* and BOE guidelines and where the SOLs and actual policy align or not. First, I will look at the *Code of Virginia* and BOE

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Guidelines to discuss where both align. Then, I will confer where both policy and SOLs do not align.

Areas within the Family Life Education section of the *Code of Virginia* that aligns with the SOLs are parental involvement, nurturing positive self-concepts, and families and marriage. As discussed in the previous section, all three grades within K-2 have SOLs applied to families, and positive self-concepts. Regarding families, we previously learned through the document and curriculum analysis that the discussion of family diversity and structure had a heteronormative discourse. Even though there was a discourse, what was actually listed within the policy language does align with the stated SOLs. The same goes for positive self-concepts where the actual policy and SOLs do align. For parental involvement, that is not a specific SOL, however some of the descriptive statements encourage the reinforcement of certain SOLs at home when teaching positive self-concepts, and feelings and emotions. The same is also aligned in the parental rights section where it states, "encourage parental guidance and involvement in the instruction of the students" (VDOE, 2016, p. 3).

In the Family Life Education section within the *Code of Virginia*, it states students in K-12 will learn about human sexuality however there are no SOLs within the K-2 curriculum about this. Granted, this is supposed to be up to grade 12, and there are other topics listed such as dating violence that is not present within the K-2 SOLs, however the purpose of this research focuses on gender and sexual identities.   The VDOE does not state if they do or do not feel that discussing human sexuality within the lower elementary school grades is age or developmentally appropriate. There is also no research provided to support particular topics being considered age or developmentally

appropriate.

In the BOE Guidelines, most of the guidelines listed in the first part are in alignment with the FLE SOLs. This is especially so when mentioning mental health awareness and families and marriage. The SOLs may not specifically mention mental health or marriage; however, it is explained in the descriptive statement. One instance of lack of alignment deals with teaching sensitive issues in gender separated classes. This is problematic because the guidelines do not list which grade levels this phrasing pertains to and the specific SOL this portion is meant to cover is not mentioned.

Part Two of the BOE guidelines differs in alignment. The first subsection in Part Two lists the content areas that are listed in the FLE SOLs but they can be altered by including other materials and topics as per the discretion of the school district. By simply reading each of the 14 content areas, they appear aligned with the current SOLs. However, if a school district or individual classroom teachers opt to include other items, misalignment may result due to the variety of interpretations possible. Furthermore, this becomes a major alignment issue on the state level because one district might include something in a content area that another might not; therefore, there is room for misalignment to occur across districts within the state. This might be viewed as an effective policy, as it builds in the concept of local control. Or, it may be viewed as an ineffective policy because local interpretations may not be research based.

Everything in the second subsection in Part Two aligns with all FLE SOLs barring the aforementioned instance regarding teaching in gender separated classes for sensitive subjects.

Part II: Educators' Perceptions and Policy Interpretations

The purpose of this section is to answer the second research question: *What are elementary educators' (teachers, administrators, counselors) perceptions concerning teaching and learning about gender and sexuality during the elementary school years? For example, how do educators interpret VDOE policy? Do educators interpret policy beyond legislative intent? If so, how?* To answer this question, I will analyze all interviews, observations, field notes, journaling, and overall curriculum within the case study. First, I will discuss the findings regarding the overall perception of the elementary educators (teachers, administrators, counselors) regarding teaching and learning about family life during the K-2 elementary school years. Next, the educators' interpretations of policy informing the Family Life Education (FLE) Standards of Learning (SOLs) and how the Virginia Department of Education presents these materials is presented. Specifically, interview questions will be analyzed to understand participants' interpretations of the policy and SOLs in order to determine whether they judge the K-2 FLE SOLs to adequately address specific issues relating to gender identity and sexuality in an age-appropriate/developmentally-appropriate manner.

Lastly, educators' perceptions about whether their professional qualifications and personal comfort levels enable them to adequately teach gender and sexuality issues in the primary classroom will be discussed. Before delving into this section, Table 5 below displays information about each participant to familiarize yourself with each educator even more. Table 5 displays their name (as a pseudonym), their current role as an educator, and the grade levels they currently teach, or are responsible for. As previously stated. There was a total of 10 participants. Four are classroom teachers (two

first grade and two second grade teachers), two FLE certified teachers, two school

counselors, and two administrators. Table 5 shows each participant's pseudonym, their

role, and the level of children with whom they have contact.

Table 5.

Participant role information.

Participant	Educator Role	Grade Level
Juliet	Classroom Teacher	First
Jamie	Classroom Teacher	First
Tobias	Classroom Teacher	Second
Heather	Classroom Teacher	Second
Terrence	FLE Certified Teacher	Kindergarten - Second
Colleen	FLE Certified Teacher	Kindergarten - Second
Samantha	School Counselor	Kindergarten - Second
Lisa	School Counselor	Kindergarten - Second
Amanda	Administrator	Kindergarten - Second
Monica	Administrator	Kindergarten - Second

Note: All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants.

Perception of Educators

During interviews, nine of 10 educators expressed positive feelings and support

for FLE to be taught in early childhood or the K-2 elementary school years. These nine

educators included three of four teachers, both administrators, both counselors, and both

FLE certified teachers. Three out of four classroom teachers felt the curriculum overall

was necessary and developmentally appropriate. However, one teacher did express

concern:

> I question whether it's really necessary at this early in age, but really, I think the
>
> focus at this point is…these are your body parts, these are the correct names for
>
> your body parts, good touch, bad touch.

Juliet's interpretation regarding the correct focus at this point in time matches state and

district expectations. Her concerns centered around not knowing exactly *how much detail* needs to go into teaching body parts and distinguishing between basic and complex concepts.

Within the theme of perceiving teaching and learning gender and sexuality in the elementary school years to be developmentally appropriate, it was important to hear specific responses from educators to better understand why they support Family Life being taught in the early elementary school years. Samantha, a counselor, articulates, "I think they need it and I think they need even more. Maybe not in Kindergarten, but I think Family Life in general." She goes on to explain,

> And as you get into the older grades, and they start talking about sexual activity
>
> with the high school students. *That's too late. That is too late to start.* You need
>
> to start *way* earlier. *Middle school is too late.*

Similarly, an administrator said, "I think we're looking more at respecting yourself, and making sure others are respecting you, and teaching what are appropriate and inappropriate touches and feelings."

While transcribing and coding interviews I noticed a similar trend dealing with the perception of educators. For example, there is fluidity in using words such as *necessary*, *important*, and *need to know*. Specifically, these three terms were repeatedly used by all teachers, counselors, and one out of two administrators when discussing their perceptions of teaching and learning FLE at the K-2 elementary grade levels. The terms *necessary* and *important* were used most often when discussing the necessity of teaching FLE at this age. Also, *important* and *need to know* were most often used to describe the importance of children understanding the correct vocabulary and terminology for body

parts as well as discerning between good and bad touches.

Interpretation of Educators

During interviews, participants discussed how they interpreted the FLE policy and SOLs. There was a variety in the type of responses I received. Overall, when discussing the policy and SOLs, themes that stood out dealt with values and beliefs and the lack of specificity involving Virginia's Family Life Policy.

Values and beliefs. Educators possess mixed feelings in their interpretations of SOLs. For the most part, teachers such as Tobias said the second grade SOLs are "adequate" and "appropriate." Jamie agreed regarding the first grade SOLs and expressed, "These are things first graders need." She goes on to share an example using SOL 1.8 which teaches about feelings and building coping mechanisms and anger management skills. Actually, most participants expressed acceptance with the SOLs related to acceptance, awareness, self-esteem, and respect in K-2, noting these concepts as building blocks for life skills and positive social skills. For instance, Amanda said,

> I think the SOLs that we have currently, because of things that may be going on outside of the child's life, is good for awareness. It is good to the parents, but also the curriculum is good in case there are situations that need to be addressed with concerns.

One concern involving values and beliefs included educators' interpretations as to whether or not SOL 1.6 was appropriate for students. While reading and interpreting the SOLs, Samantha made it a point to tell me that SOL 1.6 stuck out to her:

> The student will realize that human beings and other mammals have babies and that the babies can be breast fed. I just didn't really understand that SOL, not that

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they shouldn't be aware, but I just thought it was kind of an interesting SOL for

first graders to be learning about.

I can understand Samantha's response since an SOL about breast-feeding is considerably

more in-depth and descriptive than others. The SOL before that, 1.5 is about family

members and their responsibilities. Then, the following SOL concerns using correct

terminology for body parts (VDOE, 2016). In fact, SOL 1.6 also stood out to other

educators in addition to Samantha. For example, several specifically brought up SOL 1.6

during interviews, expressing mixed feelings. Similarly, both second grade teachers

stated concerns regarding SOL 2.3 which covers information about a baby growing inside

the uterus. Heather said, "not happening." And Tobias said, "This one can be tricky." As

it turns out Heather is right. Colleen confirmed that, in their school district, they have

chosen to teach about babies growing in the uterus in third grade, rather than second

grade.

Colleen also shared how important it was to provide the correct vocabulary. This

reminded me of when Jamie told me she had instances of students using inappropriate

slang words rather than the accurate language. Regarding families, Colleen thought the

SOLs provide enough information to do a good job with including diverse family

structures. Colleen's responses mostly focused on the SOLs in first grade that are

considered sensitive topics: 1.12, 1.7, and 1.6 which cover body part terminology and

understanding the difference between positive and inappropriate touching, which are

taught to the children in gender separate classrooms. This appears to align appropriately

with the BOE guidelines for FLE (VDOE, 2016, p. 9). Here it seems, Colleen and

Terrence have clear interpretations of this part of the policy since it is clearly stated in the

first place.

In addition to the above, Colleen explained to me her lesson plan process:

First grade is the only grade that we do this with. It was the chosen grade. For Family Life, what I do is during that particular, and I'll refer to Family Life as the sensitive topic, but that's really just the ones I'm talking about. Um, I will have a substitute come and help me. I will keep the boys and girls together for a video. The video talks about good touch, bad touch, sort of what to do if the kids are touched inappropriately. And then after, that I separate the kids by gender. The substitute will take one gender out to the hallway, or the cafeteria, or just a room nearby and play a little, short game with them while I introduce the body parts and sort of the "bathroom words," if you will, to the gender. And then we switch…so yes, they're separated by gender for the vocabulary part of it but not for the on video on the good touch, bad touch part.

Lack of specificity. While interpreting the overall policy, there was concern about whether or not the SOLs were specific enough for proper interpretation. For instance, Heather expressed concerned with the overall delivery system because she feels some SOLs are too vague and not specific enough to be addressed correctly. To illustrate, Heather expressed need for more elaboration for the following SOLs: 2.1, 2.2, and 2.4. Another concern expressed was in relation to the delivery system as "teaching them in isolation makes it difficult for kids to understand." That is, certain SOLs are not addressed on a daily basis and should be, like the concepts of acceptance and respect. When interviewing Samantha, a counselor, about the SOLs, one concern she relayed was how teachers presented the material to students: "Since we have noticed that some of the

SOLs are more open-ended and less concrete than others, one teacher might interpret and teach certain SOLs quite differently than another." Samantha was concerned about the potential of teachers failing to communicate the point of the SOL or just brushing over it, especially with the K-2 grade levels.

While interviewing Monica, she claimed some of the SOLs are "good to a point but they need to go further." She continued to explain to me that going further could mean including examples as tools. Moreover, during the interview, Monica continued to peruse and read certain SOLs aloud as examples of those she sensed needed specific examples and teaching tools provided so students can practice it.

While the lack of detail bothered most educators, some felt the lack of specificity was positive because they felt at these grade levels, the SOLs should be basic. For example, Amanda shared that her interpretations of the SOLs in FLE "skims the surface with, just again, with feelings and awareness at this age level…I feel like it just has to be basic at this level."

Both administrators shared situations and examples which could be used interchangeably while teaching the FLE curriculum depending on a child's developmental level across ages five to eight years old. They believed children at these ages need opportunities to practice in order to better understand the concepts at hand. Conversely, Amanda believed the FLE SOLs for this age group skimmed the surface and were basic; though, she claimed they *should* be basic. On the other hand, Monica expressed how the SOLs could go *further,* not by adding more detail and descriptiveness, but by providing examples for students to practice and understand. Thus, like Amanda, Monica meant keeping the SOLs basic for this age group, while similar to administrators,

pertinent examples should be provided to better teach students.

Overall, interpretations of the VDOE's FLE SOLs, curriculum, and overall policy, tend to differ the most between teachers. One reason is due to the level of comprehensiveness or lack thereof, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Between teachers, administrators, and counselors, all of them agree that any SOL in K-2 concerning acceptance, awareness, self-esteem, respect, and positive feelings are needed and interpreted appropriately for this age group.

Interpretation of FLE – addressing issues or lack thereof. All participants were asked during the interview process if they felt the FLE SOLs adequately addressed certain issues such as non-heteronormative family structures, non-heteronormative sexuality in general, children who identify as non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming, and gender stereotypes. Each of these are discussed in greater detail below based on participants' particular policy interpretation.

Non-heteronormative family structures. For this research, a non-heteronormative family structure are families that do not follow the typical hetero-familial arrangement, mainly referring to families that have two mothers or two fathers raising their child(ren) together in one household. During interviews, seven of ten participants stated that non-heteronormative family structures were not adequately addressed. Several participants read the SOLs out loud (specifically 1.4) to point out that it says, "The following family patterns are included: two parent families; extended families; relatives other than the immediate family living in the home; single parent families; adoptive families; foster families; families with stepparent; and other blended families" (VDOE, 2014, p. 16). Within this list of family patterns, same-sex parents or non-heteronormative parents were

not mentioned.

Jamie felt it was not stated in the SOLs because, as she put it: "to be honest with you, I don't think the state knows how to handle that right now." Heather pointed out that while this SOL gets very specific by naming several types of family patterns, there is still opportunity to discuss same-sex parents. Likewise, Terrence, a health teacher, tells me that even though it is not covered in the SOLs, he does include it within lessons about family and family structure. He said, "There's a point in talking about families, and the responsibilities of families, and how families get along and work together." In other words, while the state may not specifically name types of non-heteronormative families within the SOLs, some educators interpret the policy to include additional family types that are not specifically listed.

Three other participants believed non-heteronormative family structure was adequately addressed because of the emphasis on the need for loving parents regardless of type of family. For example, one administrator responded, "for this age, yes" when asked his opinion. One health teacher read aloud the descriptive statement for SOL 1.4, "The emphasis is on the need for loving parents, or other responsible adult(s) in the family, regardless of the type of family" (VDOE, 2014, p. 16) then went on to share that they interpreted this as being purposely open-ended. Colleen discussed this point similarly, pointing out that while non-heteronormative family structures may not be specifically listed within the types of family patterns, the descriptive statement does emphasize the need for loving parents *regardless of the type of family* (VDOE, 2016, emphasis added), which allows opportunity for inclusive classroom discussions with children.

Non-heteronormative sexuality in general. Eight out of ten participants believed non-heteronormative sexuality was not adequately addressed within the K-2 SOLs. However, the broad statements could accommodate different interpretations by the participants. For example, a few of the participants described how some SOLs discussed positive feelings about and acceptance of themselves without mentioning sexuality specifically. Thus, Samantha believed discussions about non-heteronormative sexuality could be incorporated into conversations about positive self-acceptance –if the teacher chose to do so. Terrence explained that non-heteronormative sexuality in general was something the health teachers did not discuss in health class. He personally thought it would be more appropriate if done so at a higher-grade level.

Of the two who stated it was adequately addressed, their responses were short and lacked explanation. Colleen said, "I guess so…I feel like it's more general," while Monica, an administrator, answered with just one word: "yes."

Children who identify as non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming. When asked if the SOLs for FLE adequately addressed children who identify as non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming, eight out of ten participants felt it was not addressed at all. Most of these participants simply stated it was not there or it was not addressed. However, one person did add that this topic *should* be included, wanted it to be addressed more, because currently, the SOLs are just too broad to cover this area. One of the health teachers did not give me a yes or no answer on this issue; rather, they expressed that children who identify as non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming should not be discussed in the lower grade levels. The only individual that claimed it was addressed in the SOLs was an administrator who stated, "I think it does…Again, it goes

to teachers being knowledgeable of it." When it comes to addressing children's non-heteronormative identities, she believed that even though the SOLs did not specifically state it, the vagueness allowed room for teachers to address it at this age level and thus, this area was adequately addressed.

One interesting fact to note is that even though one health teacher explained the curriculum did not address this specifically within the SOLs, the health educators address it during lessons as needed. He stated, "I currently address this and I know the other health teachers do in health class when we talk about families and likenesses and we align that with the curriculum in general education." So even though the SOLs do not specifically or adequately address children who identify as non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming, the health teachers have incorporated these concepts into lessons.

Gender stereotypes. For this research, gender stereotyping refers to addressing gendered, societal roles. For example, at the K-2 elementary level, gender stereotypes could be that girls cannot play football or with trucks while boys cannot play with dolls, wear pink, etc. In other words, I wanted to know whether educators thought the policy addressed acceptance and respect toward others when individuals are not following stereotypical gender roles. When asked if the SOLs for FLE adequately addressed gender stereotypes, eight out of ten participants said they were not.

Similarly, to our conversation about children's non-heteronormative identity, Terrence explained that even though gender stereotypes are not specifically stated in the SOLs, the health teachers have talked about it in class during lessons about likenesses and differences. Thus, for him, weaving this issue into lessons was a great way to teach acceptance and respect for others. It was refreshing to hear gender stereotypes are being

addressed, but since this topic is not mentioned within the SOLs specifically, this also means that other educators across the state may or may not be discussing this at all. This indicates an important disconnect throughout Virginia's public school districts that needs further study. Taken together, most participants reported gender stereotypes as missing from the FLE SOLs

While not directly asked, some participants noted during their interviews that some of the SOLs seem to be stated in stereotypical ways in terms of family and gender roles. For instance, Colleen and Samantha mentioned that SOL 1.6, which discusses how females breast feed their babies, may be seen as a stereotype since only females can do that and that is a typical family role (VDOE, 2016). Also, throughout the SOLs, terms such as *himself, herself, his* or *her*, are utilized. Some may view this as gender stereotyping or as an inequity since it makes it appear that male and female labels/roles are the only two choices, as opposed to including non-conforming identities and/or roles.

Lastly, those who believed that gender stereotyping was adequately addressed were both school counselors. The explanation was that stereotypes could be addressed when teaching SOLs related to diversity and acceptance of difference.

For some participants, there was a pattern in their responses about adequately addressing issues. Table 6 below displays each participant, their role, the issue at hand, and their responses. In total, six participants had an answer of *no* for all four issues. Within these six, all four classroom teachers responded *no* to all, as well as, one administrator and one FLE teacher. Also, of these six participants, there was no pattern as to their years of teaching experience (a range from five to 26 years). There was also no pattern as to where they grew up or went to college. Both school counselors had a

combination of *yes* and *no* answers where the only difference in response was addressing

non-heteronormative family structure. Moreover, there was a variation in responses

between both FLE teachers, however based on their interview responses which are

quoted above, their viewpoints remained similar.

A disconnect existed not only between administrators but also between an

administrator and the other participants. Barring gender stereotypes, the administrator

stated the SOLs did adequately address issues dealing with heteronormativity. This

individual was the one who provided me with short responses such as, "yes" or "yes, for

this age."

Table 6.

Participant responses to adequately addressing issues.

	Classroom Teacher				Counselor		Administrator		FLE Teacher	
	Heather	Jamie	Tobias	Juliet	Lisa	Samantha	Monica	Amanda	Colleen	Terrence
Non-heteronormative Family Structure	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Non-heteronormative Sexuality in General	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Children Who Identify as Non-heteronormative	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Not Sure	No
Gender Stereotypes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No

Conducting a thorough critical policy analysis unveiled missing discourses within

teaching/learning gender/sexuality within the K-2 elementary grade levels. The critical

policy analysis also helped determine where the SOLs and actual policy were aligned or

not. Parts of interviews were analyzed to confer whether or not the SOLs for FLE

addressed specific issues regarding gender and sexuality. Next, we will look even further

into participant interviews to understand feelings about whether or not educators are comfortable and/or feel qualified to teach and discuss gender and sexuality issues with young students.

Feeling Comfortable and/or Qualified

This section discusses the level of comfort and feelings of competence related to addressing issues associated with sexuality or gender identity. The level of comfort is a personal viewpoint and based on educators' individual opinions. Feeling qualified can be considered an umbrella concept that possibly corresponds with teaching experience, experience with identity politics, professional development and teaching training, and exposure in college classes.

Out of the 10 participants, eight felt comfortable addressing these issues. These participants included two of four classroom teachers, both counselors, both FLE teachers, and both administrators. Meanwhile, two teachers expressed they do not feel comfortable addressing issues associated with sexuality or gender identity. One of the two teachers felt she does not know enough and would like more education by explaining,

> At this age level, I feel like until it happens we're not trained on something like that and if they had a class offered or even a conference I think it'd be interesting to take just because we know what the future brings and holds. That I feel like I need to be more educated just so I am not teaching something wrong.

The other teacher discussed how she does not possess any negative feelings about it, but rather lacks experience concerning issues of identity politics and has not received any training.

Out of the 10 participants, six felt qualified with five of six expressing confidence

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in their credentials. These four included one administrator, one health teacher, both counselors, and one teacher. Amongst these four, I noted no pattern in terms of years of teaching experience or background. As for those who did not feel they were adequately qualified, one was an administrator who simply replied that they knew, "probably as much as anyone" during the interview. Three classroom teachers expressed they lacked qualifications while one health teacher felt comfortable and qualified, but expressed the need for more training on gender identity to, "better support the student and parents." One of the classroom teachers stated she only felt qualified to handle issues related to gender identity.

During my observations in the health classroom, both educators seemed very comfortable teaching elementary students, meaning their behavior appeared to match their qualifications. Since the observations took place with a first and second grade class, it was evident that a level of rapport was previously established between the students and health educators. First of all, I was able to tell Colleen and Terrence had rapport with students because in a school with a student population of 851, as shown in Table 2, both Colleen and Terrence knew the names of every student in their class. Remember, both educators work with the entire student population throughout the week in either health or PE classes. Also, rapport between students and teachers were shown by the level of respect the students showed toward both teachers. The students treated both Colleen and Terrence as if they were their classroom teacher during their given time block. The students showed this respect when they raised their hands and followed classroom rules within the health classroom setting. Similarly, both teachers showed respect to students. They each said hello to the class, showed a positive attitude, and got students excited

about the lesson they were about to teach to help make learning more fun and engaging. Having such a rapport not only builds a level of trust between the students and teachers, but also to allow students to feel more comfortable to engage, discuss, and ask questions during a health or FLE lesson.

Moreover, participants were also asked if they believed the faculty they work with appeared comfortable and/or qualified to address issues associated with sexuality or gender identity. Both administrators felt the staff (teachers and counselors) were relatively comfortable addressing these issues with one administrator adding they believed that 80% of the faculty probably felt comfortable.

The other participants expressed that they did not know whether other faculty members were comfortable. However, because as a fellow faculty member they knew first-hand the level of professional development they had received, it was safe to assume the other staff members may also struggle with their comfort levels and sense of qualifications. One even stated this was "unfamiliar territory for all of us." However, participants also expressed hope that colleagues felt comfortable and qualified based on their personal knowledge of their colleagues showing professionalism and open-mindedness in other situations. One teacher added that age may influence teachers' comfort and impressions of personal qualifications. That is, some teachers might be more comfortable because they have more years of teaching experience than the younger educators. However, it was also mentioned that some of the older, more experienced teachers might not be as open-minded due to the time periods they were raised and grew up. Even though this was voiced as a possible concern, analysis showed that the level of comfort and open-mindedness did not appear to be influenced by educators' years of

teaching.

When speaking with the teachers and administrators, there was an overwhelming positive response toward the school counselors. The participants expressed that the school counselors were probably the most comfortable and qualified in the building addressing identity politics. One of the counselors had optimistic views regarding the school's faculty on being both comfortable and qualified. Samantha stated:

I think they're getting more comfortable and qualified as these cases are coming up in our school and they might now know how to deal with it than before. But now that they are dealing with it, they're getting better and they're feeling more comfortable with it.

Both health educators felt as if the staff (teachers, administrators, and counselors) were comfortable; however, there was concern about being qualified. One health teacher said:

I don't feel like anyone is 100% qualified. I feel there is room to grow in the profession when dealing with gender identity. I know we had a case here in the past, and we handled it. In my opinion, we handled it okay. We satisfied the needs of the student, but I think there's going to be more of this in the future. I think we should be well versed in accommodating their needs.

Also, similarly to feeling comfortable, participants possessed mixed feelings about whether faculty were qualified (e.g. age, time in service, era of coming of age). One thing that really stood out to me was some concern towards the administration. Two teachers expressed strong feelings that the school's administration is neither comfortable nor qualified. One stated,

I don't think they know the students individually and that would take some real

knowing an individual. I think they might be able to paint a broad brush over it…I

don't find them particularly qualified or having time to deal with individual

student's needs.

The other teacher said,

I would say "no" only because I don't think that they see the students as – like get

to know them…I don't know if they've handled situations where they've had to

deal with bullying and acceptance of the LGBTQ community.

There might be a potential disconnect between whether or not the staff believe

themselves to be comfortable and qualified as opposed to whether administrators,

counselors, and the rest of the faculty believe they are. It is also interesting because nine

out of 10 participants have not had training in the area of identity politics, which is an

alarming pattern. The one participant, a counselor, who did have training explained how

the approach was different because her graduate school was a Christian one. Regarding

feeling comfortable and qualified, it is interesting to hear about the expressed need for

more education, professional development, and information in this area. This will be

discussed more in-depth later in this chapter.

Part III: Comparing the Policy Discourse with Educators' Perceptions

The purpose of this section is to share the findings of the third research question:

How does the policy discourse compare to elementary educators' (teachers,

administrators, counselors) perceptions? For example, does the state curriculum enable

educators to meet what they perceive as students' needs and readiness? To answer this

question, document analysis, discourse analysis, coded interviews, observations, field

notes, journaling, and overall curriculum was applied. First, a comparison between educators' perceptions and the discourse will be discussed. Next, I will dig deeper by examining the perceptions of comprehensiveness related to the Family Life Education (FLE) Standards of Learning (SOLs) and curriculum. Lastly, age appropriateness will be discussed to expand understanding of educators' perceptions and why they feel the way they do.

Comparing Perceptions to Discourse

Thus far we have engaged with the VDOE's policy and examined the discourses related to teaching and learning gender and sexuality at the elementary grade levels. We have also explored educators' multiple perspectives in terms of comprehensiveness and other considerations. In this section, the goal is to compare the policy discourse to educator perceptions to gauge similarities and differences and determine whether the state curriculum enables educators to meet what they perceive as students' needs and readiness. First, educators' perspectives will be compared within the *Code of Virginia* and the BOE Guidelines. Next, the SOLs will be compared with educators' perspectives.

Comparison of perspectives with policy discourse. Examining the the policy discourse revealed that the VDOE lacked a concrete definition of what exactly FLE is. The educators interviewed for this study noted the same silences. For example, Tobias questions, "What's the ultimate goal for Family Life at this age?" Without having an actual definition listed somewhere in the policy, other educators most likely have the same question or concern. Heather was curious as to who wrote the SOLs and policy due to the lack of information given within the *Code of Virginia* and the BOE Guidelines. Upon examination, there were no specific contributors or sponsors listed. Furthermore, in

terms of definitions and information, the policy discourse lacked a sufficient amount of detail. Throughout the *Code of Virginia* and the BOE Guidelines, there are numerous areas that afforded opportunity and potential for additional discussion related to gender and sexuality; however, the policy discourse remained silent. For the most part, the ten participants noticed likewise. For example, six educators read the silences as problematic and expressed the need for added details in the form of administrative guidance and teaching/discussion examples. Two other participants also recognized the silences but offered that the policy and SOLs may be purposely on the basic side to afford school districts and teachers more freedom to interpret the policy to fit the professional judgment of the educator. Finally, two of the educators did not indicate policy silences in this regard; rather, stating that the policy and SOLs were both developmentally appropriate and addressed what was necessary.

The next policy discourse to compare to educator perspectives deal with the inclusion of other material if deemed appropriate and necessary. Most educators had similar feelings and had a lot to say about potentially altering the FLE SOLs in order to have more conducive discussions related to identity politics. Specifics about altering certain SOLs will be analyzed deeper in a future section. However, as a whole, every educator offered fruitful ideas towards the inclusion of other materials in addition to what is stated within the BOE Guidelines in relation to the SOLs. There was not one educator who failed to build on what was presented in the policy discourse. In fact, both FLE teachers provided the most insight for improvement, most likely because they taught FLE to the students, following the SOLs and guidelines on a regular basis.

As we know, the major point of discussion centered on identity politics within

teaching/learning gender/sexuality at the elementary level. That is, in the Policy

Discourse section, the VDOE did not define biological sex, human sexuality/desire, or

the social constructs of gender. Also, the terms *man* and *woman* were used which can be

viewed as problematic for its adherence to strict binaries. When juxtaposed with the

verbal discourse, one notices a similar pattern. For example, before teaching "sensitive

subjects" the teachers separate children into two groups: boys and girls. When I

interviewed both FLE teachers, I inquired if they ever had a student who asked if they

could stay for the other group, or other gender. Both teachers told me this has not

happened, but Terrence thinks this could happen soon. Both seemed slightly unsure of

how to deal with this only because it has not happened yet and there was nothing listed

within the guidelines about addressing such an issue. This agrees with my take on the

gender discourse when I wondered about students who considered themselves

transgender or gender non-conforming, where would they go for the gender separated

lesson? Would they be allowed a choice?

   Comparison of perspectives with discourse in SOLs. The discourse around

SOLs showed similarities with the discourses around the actual policy. Again, the

educator participants expressed potentially altering some of the SOLs in order to allow

richer, more accurate discussion, but this will be more thoroughly discussed in an

upcoming section. Here, we will go over whether or not participant perspectives were

similar to or different from the policy discourse.

   Overall, I was troubled most by what I perceived to be heteronormative

undertones within the SOLs. For example, there was no mention of the need to address

any type of gender or aspect of sexuality that was seen as non-heteronormative or gender

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non-conforming. Interestingly, one of the administrators informed me that she felt comfortable with all the SOLs and what was listed after going through them prior to our interview. This is the same individual who also felt the SOLs adequately addressed issues which indicated a strong disconnect between most of the other participants (Refer back to Table 6). Most others felt the SOLs were supposed to be open-ended to allow for expanded discussion, while two other participants felt the SOLs were basic because they should be for the primary grades.

In terms of the policy silences on teaching specifically about non-heteronormative topics, a combination of counselors, teachers, and administrators felt the silences reflected the general discomfort of society at large. For example, Lisa said,

It definitely is just as area that I think is gonna take a whole before society completely embraces it with being okay...if we add a little bit more education in here then it would probably cut down on the bullying.

Jamie would agree, but indicated that political process should evolve more quickly:

I don't think the state knows how to handle that right now...I think with things changing as much as they are they need to all get together and figure out how because the little ones are going to have questions.

Samantha offered similar insights:

This area is definitely one that's becoming more prevalent at all grade levels. I think it's something that everybody needs to be comfortable with regardless of your personal feelings. You have to put that aside, especially in the public-school system.

There was strong agreement across these educators that the silences in the SOLs

pertaining to non-heteronormative topics such as non-binary gender, transgender, and so

on, needed to be addressed sooner rather than later.

Perceptions of Comprehensiveness

Throughout the entire VDOE Policy the term *comprehensive* was used nine

times: one was in the *Code of Virginia*, six in the Introduction, one in the BOE

Guidelines, and one in the Guidelines for Training. The word comprehensive was not

listed within any of the actual SOLs. Whenever it was used within the policy, it

established that the curriculum and guidelines were *comprehensive*. (Please note that

within the nine times it was mentioned, the VDOE did not provide a definition or

meaning for comprehensive.)

When interviewing every participant, each were asked whether or not the SOLs

and policy was comprehensive. Considering the policy itself did not have a concrete

definition for comprehensive, it did not surprise me that a couple of the participants were

unsure what that meant and needed clarification.

Overall, two participants (one first grade teacher and one second grade teacher)

felt the FLE curriculum was not comprehensive. The first grade teacher, Juliet, told me

she felt the SOLs were not comprehensive; but rather, they are very basic. However, she

believed the SOLs and curriculum should be basic for this age group. Heather, the

second grade teacher, expressed stronger feelings around her perception that the SOLs

lacked comprehensiveness. For instance, she compared FLE SOLs to other subject areas,

"It's far less comprehensive than the academic standards...it's just one-page front to back

for a grade level where our academic standards are documents that might have 60 pages

for each content area."

Only one out of 10 participants felt it was comprehensive. This educator was one of the certified FLE teachers. From her point of view, Colleen stated, "I think they're pretty in-depth and specific. I mean between the actual SOL and the descriptive statement[s] that were given, I think it's pretty specific," without providing additional examples as to why she felt this way. Terrence said, "I would say 90% of them cover what they need and help prepare them for growing up and moving to the next grade level...the 10% I feel like there needs to be a system for preparing each one." Like Colleen, Terrence felt there were parts that were comprehensiveness and parts that were not. I found it interesting that out of all the teachers, the FLE teachers believed the curriculum and SOLs were more comprehensive than the classroom teachers felt. In addition, one administrator stated, "It's good to a point, but needs to go further" meaning that in order for it to be more comprehensive, more examples and tools should be provided. Interestingly, the other seven participants had either mixed feelings, or responded with vague language such as "I think it depends" or "I think they are but..." It seems judging comprehensiveness had nothing to do with the individuals or FLE teachers who taught the curriculum. Rather, it was more about the SOLs and VDOE policy. If the policy itself does not have a concrete definition or meaning for what they believe a comprehensive curriculum is, then educators will more likely possess current feelings.

Samantha informed me that they could be comprehensive if we build upon it within and across other subjects in the curriculum. Lisa said, "I think it depends. I think if the teacher is able to give good examples or specifics, yes… but I think it's kind of put on the teacher. So, how far is the teacher to go into what that standard says?" Samantha's

thought about having the curriculum build across other subjects was a good idea for cross-curricular purposes. The actual language in the VDOE policy does not state if that is allowed or not, however could be argued in Part 2, Section B of the BOE Guidelines (p. 11) where items listed could be developed locally. Similarly, Lisa brought up an interesting point when she mentioned how the level of comprehensiveness could be put on the teacher based on the examples teachers provided and how they taught the SOLs. I believe her question about how far the teacher is going to go was a good one because the BOE Guidelines have not provided any information about that. Although, it was previously mentioned in the BOE Guidelines in Part 2, Section B (p. 11) where aspects of the curriculum the district is permitted to build upon if necessary but lacked in describing how much a district is allowed to build upon.

Age Appropriateness

In terms of an age appropriate education and curriculum, the *Code of Virginia* for Family Life Education (VDOE, 2016) states:

> Such curriculum guidelines shall include instruction *as appropriate* for the age of the student in family living and community relationships; the benefits, challenges, responsibilities, and value of marriage for men, women, and children, and communities; abstinence education; the value of postponing sexual activity; the benefits of adoption as a positive choice in the event of an unwanted pregnancy; human sexuality; human reproduction; dating violence; the characteristics of abusive relationships; steps to take to avoid sexual assault, and the availability of counseling and legal resources, and, in the event of such sexual assault, the importance of immediate medical attention and advice, as well as the

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requirements of the law; the etiology, prevention and effects of sexually transmitted diseases; and mental health education and awareness. All such instruction shall be designed to promote parental involvement, foster positive self-concepts and provide mechanisms for coping with peer pressure and the stresses of modern living *according to the students' developmental stages and abilities*. (p. 2, emphasis added)

The BOE Guidelines for FLE also mentioned age appropriateness, "A local curriculum plan shall use as a reference the *Family Life Education Standards of Learning* objectives approved by the Board of Education and shall provide *age-appropriate*, medically-accurate instruction in relation to students' developmental stages and abilities" (VDOE, 2016, p. 11, emphasis added).

These policy definitions were compared to educators' interpretations by asking them whether or not they felt the SOLs for FLE were considered *age appropriate*. Almost all participants expressed the FLE SOLs and curriculum were *age appropriate*. Their answers were qualified by noting that since most of the SOLs within grades K-2 were more simplified and less extensive than the upper grades, there were no reasons to worry they went beyond what a child could process at this particular age. For example, one teacher participant, Juliet, believed, "They've [the FLE SOLs] been simplified enough for just a general gist, but I don't think it gives them too much information at an early age." In addition, one of the counselors told me, "I think they've done a good job [being age-appropriate]. It's sort of, yeah, keeping it on the development…that each child should be on at that time."

Since most of the SOLs within these three grades are related to self-acceptance

and accepting others, family diversity, and good and bad touches, they were all considered important, appropriate, and something the community could support. However, one teacher and both FLE certified teachers expressed some concerns related to age appropriateness. One stated concern about the first grade SOLs by stating:

> I think that some of the things they learned in first grade, it might go over their head…Kindergarten is grade level appropriate and those kids can see how that relates to everyday life…first grade, I would say, they are more second grade or even third grade appropriate.

There were no concerns related to the second grade SOLs. The other FLE educator believed the curriculum was age appropriate but expressed awareness and understanding that others felt differently. The first grade teacher was not necessarily concerned with the age appropriateness of the material, but rather the developmental level of her students. She explained to me how several times, after the lessons about the body parts and good and bad touches, there was a sense of immaturity in the classroom by laughing at the vocabulary and terminology used and even students telling others the slang words for the body parts.

The one participant who did not fully agree with whether or not it was considered age appropriate was a second grade teacher who stated,

> Some yes and some no....the SOLs were age appropriate as far as acceptance and appreciation of everyone, how to show friendship and affection, how to control emotions…The one I'm not sure about is where babies grow inside their mother's body.

Interestingly enough, the other second grade teacher discussed this specific SOL during

the interview as well. It was expressed that it was age appropriate to learn about this; however, there was concern about that specific SOL being more difficult to teach to second graders compared to the others. The actual SOL reads:

> 2.3 The student will become aware that babies grow inside the mother's body in a special place called the uterus. Descriptive Statement: The purpose of this objective is to provide basic, age-appropriate, medically-accurate information; to demonstrate ease or comfort in talking about reproduction-related topics; and to correct misinformation. (VDOE, 2016, p. 18)

As mentioned earlier, this SOL was actually not taught in second grade at this school but is rather taught in third grade. This is not a violation of the VDOE. In fact, within the FLE Guidelines it states, "local school divisions may reassign the grade designation of the Standards of Learning objectives within grades K‑6" (VDOE, 2016, p. 9). One of the FLE educators informed me that a committee (community involvement team, or school health advisory board) meets annually to discuss the curriculum as a school district to discuss issues such as age-appropriateness.

<div align="center">

Additional Insights

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The purpose of this section is to share surprises, additional insights, and unexpected results. Some of these insights helped to answer questions I did not know I had until I began the research, data collection, and analysis. Even though these may not directly answer one of the research questions, each insight helped in my interpretation of the data especially when addressing identity politics. First, I will go over the participants' concerns and/or interests with the need for more education and professional development (Including staff who are not FLE certified). Next, I will discuss parental

involvement and opting out of FLE. Lastly, I will analyze the educators' perspectives of how they would alter the K-2 SOLs to allow more conducive discussion towards specific issues related to gender and sexuality at the elementary grade levels.

Professional Development

Previously in this chapter was a discussion about educators' feelings of whether or not they were comfortable with and qualified to address issues associated with sexuality or gender identity. *All participants stated at one time during their interview that they have not received any type of professional development or training in identity politics.* This lack of educator training was related to why some participants did not feel comfortable and/or qualified to address gender and sexuality issues with students. This posed a concern because if educators in one school are not receiving adequate training then it is safe to assume other educators in Virginia are not as well. Here, professional development can be any type of meetings, trainings, seminars, conferences, and college classes. Based on the current research and interviews I was not surprised about the deficit in identity politics training. However, I was surprised that *none* of the participants (even counselors and administrators) attended even one professional training session dealing with sex and/or gender identity. Personally, as an educator, I was not required to take college classes in identity politics before earning my teaching license. The school district I currently work in has not offered me training either. I sought professional development on my own by attending conferences, reading literature, and taking courses that discussed this in my doctoral studies.

As discussed earlier, two participants had a college class related to sexuality; however, they did not feel it was up to date with current understandings. For example,

Terrence told me he had a human sexuality class, but they did not discuss gender identity.

In another example, Samantha reported having a related college class but that since the

graduate program was at Christian university, they "had a different approach to it."

Samantha did not provide any further information or details as to the "approach" the

Christian college took.

>At the end of our interview, Terrence thanked me and said,

>I'm glad that you involved me in this. I know it's coming. I know that we're
>
>going to have more issues that involve these sexuality and gender and I'd like
>
>more information on it, more personal development would be great.

Two other participants used the word *education* in expressing their professional

development needs. Another reason why educators expressed interest in wanting to learn

more is because most of them have not had experience or situations related to gender

identity and sexuality in their personal or professional lives. Some believed it was

because they are elementary school educators and felt students might not be aware of this

self-aspect at this age. However, some acknowledged that even though this situation may

not have happened, it does not mean that it never will, especially in our changing times.

During the interview process several educators talked about an instance the school had

with one student who decided to change her gender and wanted to be identified as a boy

in second grade. It seemed to have been handled well, but several participants expressed

concerns with not having any prior experience that made them doubtful if they were truly

making school an equitable experience for this student.

Finally, much of the interest regarding more education and professional development came from educators who were not FLE certified. That showed how all staff should be given the option to attend any form of professional development if it were provided.

Parental Involvement and Opting Out

Another additional insight was related to parental involvement and opting out of FLE. As previously stated, this was mentioned within the VDOE's policy in several areas as well as interviews, and school documents. One thing I learned, but did not realize before, is that the FLE curriculum is the only area of which the VDOE allows parents the choice of whether or not their child participates. This begs the question, why and/or how did this stipulation come to be? Who was at the policy table making this decision? Also, might it be that the current FLE curriculum maintains a heteronormative undertone so that less parents choose to opt out? The answers to these questions are not clear.

Parental involvement. We have learned parents have the right to review the materials provided by their local school district (VDOE, 2016). Also, some of the SOLs directly mention the right to parental discussion. In alignment with these written policies are interpretations of the teachers. For example, the lesson plans provided by one of the FLE teachers included a section stating that parents may ask questions (Please, see Appendix H for details). In addition to including parents in decision making, there are guidelines for *community involvement* as well:

> An important element in the successful implementation of a Family Life
> Education program is parent/community involvement. A theme that runs
> throughout the program is the parent/teacher team approach to Family Life

Education. Because of the sensitive nature of program content, a planned

approach to parent/community involvement is critical. (VDOE, 2016, p. 48)

While studying this particular case, there were two aspects related to parental

involvement that interested me was the apparent "feast or famine" tendencies. That is, the

FLE teachers as well as classroom teachers informed me that there is a scheduled day

when parents are invited to come and preview the material and curriculum, as per the

BOE guidelines. However, parents rarely attend the session even after correspondence is

sent home to parents via letters and text alerts. Nevertheless, once the FLE teachers

begin teaching students and going through the FLE curriculum and lesson with students,

the FLE teachers and some classroom teachers have an influx of phone calls and emails

from parents about FLE. Both FLE teachers used the word *curious* when I asked them

why parents contact them. Colleen said, "All of a sudden, I get parents that are super

involved and want to know [what, how, and why] I taught their children the things that I

did...I tell them they had the option to view the material."

Opting out. The *Code of Virginia* and the BOE guidelines mention how parents

have the option and right to opt their child out of the FLE program. In fact, the policy

requires schools to include the following quote when informing parents of upcoming

implementation:

Parents and guardians have the right to review the family life education program

offered by their school division, including written and audio-visual educational

materials used in the program…Parents and guardians also have the right to

excuse their child from all or part of family life education instruction. (VDOE,

2016, p. 3).

The school fully abides by including this quote in the annual letter that goes to households. (Please, see Appendix G for a copy of The Opt Out form.) I was relieved to hear that out of every student in the building they only have about two to three students a year opt out. The teachers believe the reasons for those children opting out was either for religious reasons or because the parents felt more comfortable teaching family life issues to their child at home.

Altering the FLE SOLs

During interviews, I was curious about educators' perceptions of how they would alter the K-2 SOLs to make them more conducive to their students learning what they should be learning based on their developmental levels. As stated prior, gaps in the policy and curriculum fell along the lines of including discussions about non-heteronormative family structures, non-heteronormative sexuality in general, children who identify as non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming, and gender stereotypes. For those who believed they did not adequately address as issue, as previously seen in Table 6, I asked how would they alter the SOLs to better align with their professional opinions. I heard some really insightful suggestions, which showed how educators care about issues associated with identity politics.

Non-heteronormative family structures. For those who felt the SOLs did not adequately address this (seven out of ten), most of them referred to the actual SOLs and felt non-heteronormative family structures could be included with the already listed family patterns within K.4, 1.4, 2.2, and 2.6. Some of these SOLs were discussed in the Policy Discourse section since I also felt they did not address non-heteronormative family structure thus aligning educators' perceptions to the discourse even more. Amanda, an

administrator believed it would be healthy to discuss at this age level. A counselor said, "just talking about how families come in different shapes and sizes, and I think it we could kind of blend it in with that."

Non-heteronormative sexuality in general. Eight out of ten participants believed this was not addressed in the SOLs. Unlike family structures, the comments were mixed about whether or not to include it. In other words, even though the SOLs may not adequately address non-heteronormative sexuality in general, some educators felt it should be included in the SOLs but at a higher-grade level. Two out of the eight felt this way. Lisa said, "that might be something that you do maybe later. I think when we get specific about things, I think we need to wait for a little bit older. I think we can sort of put it in bits and pieces in the younger grades…just kind of sprinkle it through" and Terrence also expressed a higher level might be more appropriate.

Those who felt it could be discussed in a developmental and age appropriate way offered several suggestions. A first grade teacher suggested introducing this even in Kindergarten to promote early acceptance. Similarly, a second grade teacher suggested incorporating this in SOL 2.1 which is about acceptance and appreciating others (VDOE, 2016). In fact, it was suggested to even break down SOL 2.1 even further and make a 2.1a and a 2.1b. Heather's idea was, "A would be on strengths and weaknesses. B could go down the list. B could be non-heterosexual orientation; C could be race or ethnicity. 2.1 could be elaborated to encompass a lot more than it does right now." Moreover, another teacher suggested to discuss this in second grade within 2.4 and 2.5 which is about dealing with feelings and behaviors. All three suggested second grade SOLs which were discussed in the Policy Discourse section.

Children who identify as non-heterosexual or gender nonconforming. For discussing children who identify as non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming, recommendations were not as specific as the previous two provided by eight out of ten participants. I reason this was due to the fact that this is the area of the four where teachers informed me they have the least experience. The only SOL listed that may be expanded upon in this regard was 2.5 which deals with feelings. This could be used on both sides knowing students have an adult such as a teacher or counselor they could talk to if they have feelings about themselves or others that are non-heterosexual. Or the contrary that a student should feel comfortable to discuss with an adult if they are negative feelings. One teacher suggested adding an additional SOL in second grade to be used as an umbrella SOL for acceptance of diversity and differences as an antidiscrimination standard.

One counselor felt it might be more appropriate to discuss this at an older grade level. Two others (a counselor and administrator) were simply unsure of how to address this topic within the SOLs. One concern was allowing teachers' personal opinions to get in the way.

Gender stereotypes. Out of all four issues, this one probably had the most diversity in suggestions from eight out of ten participants. Specific SOLs suggested for alterations were 1.2 and 2.8 which were both analyzed in the Policy Discourse section. SOL 1.2 centered on respect from others while SOL 2.8 dealt with emotions shaped by commercials, for example (VDOE, 2016). SOL 2.8 was recommended as an opportunity to discuss gender stereotypes in second grade because commercials possess many stereotypes having to do with makeup, sports, and cars. Colleen, an FLE teacher, did not

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provide a specific SOL, however, she believed gender stereotypes could be added into some of the descriptive statements throughout, as needed. Amanda felt similarly about adding gender stereotypes into discussions about acceptance of self and others.

Two participants, an administrator, and a counselor, suggested creating a separate SOL within each grade level that deals with gender stereotypes specifically. The counselor said,

I think that one we can talk about at an early age. I think it's the importance that everybody doesn't… girls don't always need to wear a dress. We all have different things we're interested in, we have different styles.

The administrator shared similarly:

You could have the discussion that boys and girls are different but that doesn't mean girls can't play football, boys can't like to dress up...I think that could be very diplomatically addressed at grade two, maybe grade one or two.

Summary and Conclusions

The policy's silence on non-heteronormative aspects of these topics were clearly inequitable, leaving LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students invisible and unheard. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensiveness within the policy and subsequent SOLs meant implementation of FLE was dependent on individual educators' perceptions and interpretations. As a result of the lack of clarity, along with the deficit in training and professional development, educators were left questioning whether they were comfortable and/or qualified to address issues related to identity politics. While the SOLs do carry potential for inclusive discussion, without specific guidelines, anything considered non-heteronormative or non-conforming will potentially remain unseen and

unsaid. However, on a positive note, participants expressed optimism on including

LGBTQ concerns in the existing structures, along with several ideas on how the existing

SOLs could be altered and/or improved. This could signal a turning point for potential

future change in teaching and learning about LGBTQ issues in elementary schools.

CHAPTER FIVE

CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

After carefully reviewing Virginia's Family Life Education: Board of Education Guidelines and Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools, a heteronormative voice could be detected in each main section and subsections. Specifically, heteronormative discourses existed within the *Code of Virginia*, Board of Education Guidelines, and Standards of Learning. This was especially so in that there was no mention of non-heteronormative aspects within gender and sexuality. The most obvious silences were related to discussions around marriage, human sexuality, and gender terminology. More transparent suppressions included the parent exclusion clause and ensuing disconnects in local program development. Gorski (2013) explains "Another way heteronormativity is sustained in schools is through the omission of LGBTQ concerns from the curriculum" (p. 227). The FLE policy does not provide a means for the voices of LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students, parents, educators, and community members to be hear. In addition, the LGBTQ community was stifled by not incorporating gender identity and sexual orientation into the curriculum. This chapter will discuss and interpret why heteronormativity within the FLE guidelines and SOLs are detrimental.

Once all qualitative data: interviews, observations, and field notes, were coded and analyzed, the overall data demonstrated participants did not possess negative feelings towards teaching FLE in general in the K-2 grade levels. Most educators felt it was

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necessary to teach and crucial for children to understand the vocabulary at a young age as long as it was considered developmentally age appropriate. This was especially so regarding acceptance of self and others, respect, and positive self-concepts. Regarding perceptions about teaching/learning about gender and sexuality during the elementary school years, the findings were mixed. Reasons included the lack of specificity within the SOLs for how teachers should address such issues, the overall delivery system, and debates regarding age appropriateness. Each reason affected the policy interpretation for each educator due to the level of comprehensiveness or lack thereof. Furthermore, such reasons illuminate the disconnect as to why educators may or may not feel comfortable and/or qualified to address issues associated with sexuality or gender identity.

Related to findings about comparing the policy discourse to educators' perceptions towards the curriculum and SOLs, most of the perspectives were similar to the discourse. These perceptions were found the most when discussing how each participant would alter the SOLs and curriculum to allow more conducive discussions about gender and sexuality. Here, much of the discourse was aligned with educators' perceptions.

Revisiting Policy Discourses

The findings from the critical policy analysis showed a lack of attention to what teachers thought were important in teaching and learning gender and sexuality therefore heteronormativity was maintained within the curriculum with underlying traces throughout the policy. I am revisiting some of the policy discourses as discussed in Chapter Four to provide insight into my personal interpretation after all data collection has been completed, analyzed, and interpreted. In a sense, the following sections and

subsections could be considered a list of personal reactions, grievances, and items that left me feeling unsettled within the Virginia's Family Life Education: Board of Education Guidelines and Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools.

Heteronormativity in the Code of Virginia and BOE Guidelines. We have learned the actual policy language failed to recognize, define, or expose educators and students to any type of non-heteronormative language even though the VDOE believes in having a comprehensive and age appropriate curriculum. Because of this, aspects within the policy did not align with the SOLs relating to addressing specific issues, including material as per the district's discretion, and teaching sensitive subjects in gender separated classes. Virginia's SOLs for FLE are geared mainly toward heteronormative lifestyles through the discussion of family life, marriage, and family planning. Without exposing or teaching students at a younger age about non-heteronormative lifestyle choices, students might be under the impression that heteronormativity is the "normal" or correct way to live and should not digress or divert from diversity. This will hinder a child and allow them to think that being a nonconformist, especially related to gender and sexuality, is wrong, which means they, as a person, are wrong. This is potentially setting up a child to fail academically, emotionally, socially, and psychologically.

Marriage. As stated, Virginia's SOLs for Family Life Education expressed a heteronormative curriculum. In Chapter Four I quoted part of the introductory paragraph for the curriculum guidelines, which is also page two on the policy document itself (VDOE, 2016). In terms of expressing a heteronormative discourse within the curriculum, marriage was mentioned but did not include same-sex marriage which pointed to the assumption of the heterosexual stereotype of marriage. This

heteronormative undertone could impede the teaching and learning of gender and sexuality depending on the perception of the educator. As an educator, what am I supposed to do if a student who has same-sex parents questions this? Or how am I supposed to address this if another student asks me a question about same-sex marriage? Will I be penalized or reprimanded in any way since the state has chosen not to discuss this specifically within their policy? The same goes for the school district itself. Would there be negative consequences if an educator discussed this or addressed an issue using their professionalism? Perhaps, without clarity for better interpretation the state policy could potentially be setting an educator up for failure or being reprimanded for addressing or not addressing an issue in which they deem appropriate. This obvious problem needs to be addressed to avoid future complications when dealing with identity politics.

Not only that, but the issue goes beyond same-sex marriage and marital/familial benefits. The listed questions and unresolved issues are the same for human sexuality, lack of gender terminology, option to opt out of FLE, local program development disconnect, and acceptance of non-heteronormative sexuality in general. How is an educator supposed to adequately and appropriately address this without detailed guidance and fear of being chastised for trying to help a student? However, it is important to note that due to my advocacy stance, what I might view as a heteronormative discourse or oppressive language within the policy may not be perceived that way to another individual or even a queer theorist, feminist, or social justice leader. For example, some advocates may view their list of families as a positive. Even though same-sex families or nonheteronormative are not specifically listed, these families may see themselves

represented under two-parent families, blended families, or adoptive families. Another

approach that differs than my perspective is that by not listing them specifically there

might be less of a "red flag" to those who considering opting out, which shows how

sometimes providing less information could be positive.

Human sexuality. As we have discovered, human sexuality is not defined within

the Family Life policy, specifically in the BOE Guidelines. As previously stated, this

term is placed between abstaining from sexual activity and human reproduction. In my

eyes, the state purposefully and intentionally wrote it that way to in order to avoid the

discussion of sexual orientation and preference. I think it was purposefully placed

between abstinence and reproduction to focus on the heteronormative aspect of sexuality

since abstinence and reproduction taught in the later years is centered around

relationships between a man and a woman. Furthermore, one might assume such

heteronormative features eluded within the context holds that discourse since the terms

man and *woman* are already listed within the paragraph and did not digress from this.

Again, depending on the educator's perception, this could hinder teaching and learning

both gender identity and sexuality to students. This is especially so since human

sexuality is one of the content areas the VDOE allows to be developed locally. As a

content area, "human sexuality" is simply stated on page 10 of the policy (VDOE, 2016)

with no other guidance. I find this unsettling because human sexuality, a huge umbrella

term, is left undefined. To me, this screams disconnect and avoidance however others

might appreciate the open-endedness of the topic. Disconnect between districts, and even

disconnect between schools within the same district depending on who creates the local

lesson plans. The lack of definition seems like an avoidance of whether or not anything

beyond the stereotypical or non-heteronormative should be discussed. For example, one school district may be more progressive in their thinking and view human sexuality in a holistic manner and have chosen to teach or discuss sexuality that is non-heteronormative, especially knowing they have students who identify that way. On the other hand, a neighboring school district might oppose or not be willing to recognize anything that is non-conforming or heteronormative and have chosen to not discuss this aspect in human sexuality. Any leader for social justice would agree this is a clear discourse and inequity!

   The use of binaries…the lack thereof. In Chapter Four, we discussed within the critical policy analysis that throughout the entire FLE policy there was no mention of terms such as male or female (VDOE, 2016). The lack of binary language within gender alarms me. This is because the policy itself discussed teaching human sexuality, reproduction, marriage, and families and yet they opted to not use terms such as male and female. However, the policy used the term gender and used male and female pronouns within the SOLs. One thing I wanted to know was why did the VDOE not include binary language? What is the message they are sending teachers and students? A queer theorist and feminist would believe this will not diminish any type of gender stereotype because the wording assumes heteronormativity. Furthermore, both would most likely conclude that the FLE policy does not support gender choice. For example, if a student or educator who identified as transgender or gender non-conforming read the policy, they would likely notice and feel the exclusion. This was even more so when the policy discussed teaching sensitive subjects to gender separated classes on pages nine and eleven (VDOE, 2016).

Opting out. I have a problem with allowing parents the choice to opt their child out of FLE, however that is a personal opinion. Why is FLE the only subject in Virginia where parents are allowed to opt out their child? I disagree with this policy feature. FLE is and can be an important piece of everyday life for students, if taught rationally with equity. In a radical sense, if parents protested enough, they could potentially opt their child out of other subjects as well. Hypothetically speaking, if a parent wanted to opt their child out of science because they believe in the biblical creation story, then they are creating a gap in their child's exposure to certain subject areas. Some may feel this example is extreme, but the point is that opting out will decrease exposure to topics and will take away the students' right to learn varying points of views.

Who is the opt out policy clause protecting? This is relevant to feminism and queer theory because it is expressing the potential loss of voice and exposure to the LGBTQ community. Parents are limiting their child's opportunities to experience inclusivity. It is important to note that other social justice leaders may view the language in the opt-out section to be positive and equitable in terms of the lack of actual language. In a sense, some may see this as "less is more". Perhaps, the lesser amount of information provided to parents will keep them from opting their child out.

Lack of specificity and comprehensiveness. It seems to me the lack of specificity and comprehensiveness is a catch 22, which is also an equity issue. Districts and schools do want some freedoms in what and how they teach without the state giving direction, but at the same time the lack of clarity alters interpretation. For example, when teaching and learning about the benefits of marriage, or family relationships, both are two of the 14 content areas in which the state allows local development. Again, without any other

guidance, districts are left to their own interpretation. Depending on how this is

approached, lesson plans are created, teachers are trained and informed how to teach it,

thus likeliness for inequities within teaching/learning gender and sexuality will exist.

Again, what I have stated was my personal viewpoint due to my critical advocacy stance

on this issue. It is important to note that while I may feel this way, other advocates may

feel different. For example, when discussing local control and leaving certain content

areas up to the district, that can be seen as equitable and positive (In the United States,

local control is an important value). Taking away local control from school districts could

worry and upset educators and school leaders even more. Furthermore, some may view

the lack of specificity as positive rather than a hindrance because of that fact that it holds

potential for more flexibility.

I think without the VDOE offering more concrete definitions such as to what they

consider to be age appropriate with the scientific research to support it, more educators

will have a disconnect to this subject area and research. For example, the terms

"appropriate" and "age appropriate" are used frequently through the code and BOE

guidelines. However nowhere in the policy does it explain what they consider age

appropriate for teaching topics, context, and comprehension. For example, the *Code of*

Virginia states, "guidelines shall include instruction as appropriate for the age of the

student in family living and community relationships" (VDOE, 2016, p. 2). The word

"appropriate" is used in a general and broad manner that is easily subjective to readers it.

Where is the science or research behind the overall decision to use *appropriate* and *age*

appropriate in the policy language? Not knowing the sources behind the terms or the

science about age appropriateness will create a greater risk for certain teaching

applications to be absent as well as potential heteronormative conceptualizations within FLE. A queer theorist or feminist would want more specific terms to ensure their voices are being heard, understood, and not oppressed.

Moreover, the need for comprehensiveness within all parts of the policy could allow educators to feel more comfortable and qualified to address issues. This could be an opportunity for the VDOE to provide training as well that will enhance feelings of comfort and increase qualifications. Overall, it did not surprise me that educators had different perceptions about teaching gender and sexuality in the elementary years due to personal beliefs, opinions, prior knowledge, and experience.

Interpretations will be different. All the data has been discussed so far possess a common theme: diverse interpretations and how they could impede learning gender and sexuality. In the BOE Guideline sections about being comprehensive and inclusive, we know as discussed, the disconnect and levels of interpretations will increase without understanding the state's terminology and meanings within the policy. That is, even though the VDOE allows the inclusion of other material if deemed appropriate and necessary, leaders in one school district may find it appropriate to discuss non-heteronormative family structure based on this guideline while leadership in another district may disagree. This means there is potential for imbalance or inequity of what is being taught and addressed within classroom lessons. However, even though I view this as a potential imbalance or inequity other queer theorists, feminists, or social justice leaders may see this as progress. Even though one district might vary their lessons or curricular from another, at least there are students who are currently learning and

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potential exposer to nonheteronormative curricula, which is a step forward in the right direction.

Even on a within-school level, conducting interviews with educators who work in the same building have revealed differences in interpretation of the SOLs and Guidelines. Who could blame them? The lack of comprehensiveness, details, and clarity will lead anybody to base their interpretation on their own perceptions.

The sounds of silence. This time, the silences need to be recognized and made louder! It is time to turn off the mute buttons that some districts have chosen to push. A queer theorist would agree that the VDOE's FLE policy leaves students who identify as LGBTQ or gender non-conforming to feel invisible with no voice within their classroom, school, and community. This negative oppression could have both short and long-term effects on a student, which was discussed in the Review of Literature. Queer theorists, feminists, and social justice leaders would say the overall policy does not diminish gender stereotypes and does not support gender and sexual equality for all, especially those who identify as LGBTQ or gender nonconforming. If anything, the policy silences suggest stereotypical, heteronormative stigma that so many have been fighting against! In the first paragraph of the first chapter, I mentioned how in recent years there have been progressions in equity such as legalization of same-sex marriage, bathroom rights concerning gender identity, adoption rights, and eliminating the "don't ask, don't tell" policy in the military. Yet, in spite of these amazing societal progressions, prejudice and homophobic victimization still exists within America's public schools. Could this be because the state fails to acknowledge such progressions within their SOLs and policy? If we taught and discussed the progression of LGBTQ rights with students more, perhaps

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homophobic victimization would decrease and acceptance and feelings towards a safe and supportive environment may surge. If students remain unaware of changing attitudes in their country and system of law, how can they possibly consider similar changes in their own thinking?

I would like to note and remind once again, this chapter I offered my personal opinions, viewpoints, and acknowledge that other queer theorists, feminists, or social justice leaders may disagree with my advocacy stance and feel parts of the policy are not diminishing rights from LGBTQ or gender non-conforming students. For instance, even though I discussed in this section how students might feel silenced or oppressed because the policy does not mention LGBTQ or gender non-conforming, some might not view this as inequitable and feel that "less is more". For example, if the VDOE were to add the term "LGBTQ" to the policy, other individuals will still feel left out (e.g asexual, intersex, pansexual). In other words, with the increasing number of ways individuals identify themselves sexually and gender related, the list of identities could keep going and there will always be someone who might feel left out. To summarize, we should avoid categorizing people and rather acknowledging that people are human. We are all different and do not need to be categorized.

Within all the aforementioned, one part of the findings that gave me the most insight was seeing how much of the policy discourse aligned with how the participants would potentially alter the SOLs to allow more encouraging and open discussions.

Heteronormativity within the Standards of Learning. In Chapter Four, I went into detail listing each specific SOL and descriptive statement that dealt with teaching and learning gender and sexuality. Here, I will continue to provide my interpretation and

reactions toward some of those SOLs after all data collection had been completed, coded, and analyzed.

    SOLs related to positive feelings and respect. The following SOLs between Kindergarten through second grade have been mentioned in Chapter Four about having a discourse within the topics of positive feelings of self, others, and respect. "K.1 - The student will experience success and positive feelings about self" (VDOE, 2016, p. 14). I feel this SOL carries much potential for understanding non-heteronormative or non-conforming aspects of students and understand gender stereotypes; however not listing this specifically might make an educator feel this is not appropriate to engage and discuss within the classroom. This is because a teacher may not know how to address this correctly and in a sensitive fashion. "K.2 - The student will experience respect from and for others" (VDOE, 2016, p. 14). This SOL is similar to the prior one in terms of understanding respect carries much potential for making a classroom environment more equitable for LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students. I think providing educators with some equitable examples would be helpful. "1.1 - The student will experience continuing success and positive feelings about self" (VDOE, 2016, p. 16). I believe this SOL carries potential for understanding non-heteronormative or non-conforming aspects of students and understand gender stereotypes; however not listing this specifically may keep such classroom discussion silenced. This is because a teacher may not know how to address this correctly and in a sensitive fashion. "1.2 - The student will experience continuing respect from others" (VDOE, 2016, p. 16). For each of these SOLs, it is important to address such issues and be provided examples in order to help educators. If

not, an educator might not choose to discuss these issues, which could hamper a safe and supportive environment for all students and impede the decrease of peer victimization.

Other SOLs related to feelings are "1.8 - The student will express his or her feelings of happiness, sadness, and anger to the teacher" and "2.5 - The student will demonstrate appropriate ways of dealing with feelings" (VDOE, 2016, p. 16, 18). Technically, what is an appropriate way of dealing with feelings? Since it does not mention feelings related to their gender or sexual orientation, how is an educator supposed to address such issues if a child were to bring it up? Did the state choose to not mention this because they might believe these feelings are inappropriate? A queer theorist would want a child, any child, to feel comfortable to express such feelings to someone they trust knowing they will not be chastised for possessing such feelings.

I was left feeling bothered and unsettled the most by SOL 2.1 "The student will recognize that everyone has strengths and weaknesses and that all persons need to be accepted and appreciated as worthwhile" (VDOE, 2016, p. 18). This was because I saw their wording as a major equity issue, especially relating to gender and sexuality. As previously stated in Chapter Four, the descriptive statement first expresses the need to accept and appreciate everyone as they are but a few sentences later it mentions accepting the things that cannot be changed. In terms of identity politics, this is a discourse that cannot go unnoticed! We know not everyone will be accepting of individuals who identify as LGBTQ or gender non-conforming, however it should be required to say that gender and sexuality is not a strength nor a weakness. For example, an individual might believe someone who is not heterosexual is weak. How does a teacher address this issue?

SOLs related to effects of behavior and emotions. Between Kindergarten through

second grade discourse emerged from the SOLs on the effects of students' behavior on

themselves and others. "K.3 - The student will become aware of the effects of his or her

behavior on others and the effects of others' behavior on himself or herself" (VDOE,

2016, p. 14). This SOL addressed bathroom privacy within the descriptive statement but

did not discuss bathroom in the gender or binary sense nor did it approach the topic with

gender non-conforming children in mind. How do we as educators address bathroom

related issues in regards to gender identity? For example, if a female student were to ask

a teacher about using the boys' bathroom, how should a teacher respond regardless of

whether or not the child was being serious about using the boys' bathroom or if the child

was simply curious? SOLs "1.3 - The student will become aware of the effects of his or

her behavior on others and the effects of others' behavior on himself or herself" and "2.4 -

The student will become aware of the need to take responsibility for the effects of his or

her behavior on others" are similar in terms of discussing behavior. This carries potential

for a meaningful lesson on bullying and could be tied in with accepting others but the

state fails to mention that (VDOE, 2016, p. 16, 18). How should a teacher discuss

acceptance for others who are non-conforming? For example, a boy might come to

school wearing a skirt and students begin to make fun of him. How does a teacher

address this to students to know it is okay and it was that student's choice? Moreover,

what if a student brings up something a parent has said at home such as "My dad said

boys who wear pink or wear skirts are sissies." A queer theorist or feminist would want

to know how should the educator proceed in order to make the boy who wore the skirt

not feel oppressed.

An interesting and different SOL related to emotions is "2.8 - The student will be conscious of how commercials use our emotions to make us want products" (VDOE, 2016, p. 19). When discussing emotions that can be created through commercials, there is opportunity to discuss gender stereotypes, non-heterosexual or non-conforming examples, and sexual identities that could be or not be portrayed in commercials. For example, make-up commercials are geared towards females, and sports are geared towards males. Since the SOL or descriptive statement does not discuss or mention gender stereotypes a queer theorist and feminist would believe this SOL though different, is unaccommodating. Without specifically stating or addressing stereotypes in commercials and the emotions they make you feel, a teacher may not address this sufficiently or at all.

SOLs related to family. The following SOLs between Kindergarten through second grade include discourses within the topics of family members, relationships, and structure. "K.4 - The student will recognize that everyone is a member of a family and that families come in many forms" (VDOE, 2016, p. 14). This SOL about family provides a detailed list of a variety of families however there is no mention of same-sex families or families with a non-heteronormative structure. This could hinder a teacher addressing this if it were to come up in a classroom discussion. For example, if a student had two mommies or two daddies and brought this up in class, does it mean the state does not recognize that student's family structure as a family? Would a teacher be reprimanded for positively addressing this in class? Would the student be teased by fellow students? Similarly, is SOL, "K.5 - The student will identify members of his or her own family" regarding family and could possess similar hindrances and inequities if not

mentioned or addressed correctly (VDOE, 2016, p. 14). "1.4 - The student will develop an understanding of the importance of a family and of different family patterns" and "1.5 - The student will identify family members and their responsibilities in contributing to the successful functioning of the family" are similar to the Kindergarten SOLs (VDOE, 2016, p. 16). Both are like SOLs K.4 and K.5 for recognizing or failure to recognize all types of families, including non-heterosexual partners. A queer theorist would say these SOLs are inequitable and fail to acknowledge families with a non-heteronormative structure. Simply because the SOLs do not list these families does not mean they exist. Remember, non-heteronormative family structures may not always mean having same-sex parents or gender non-conforming parents. For example, a student can have a brother or sister that is transgender, intersex, or gender non-conforming. If this were to come up in a classroom discussion, would that student feel ostracized for talking about his/her family dynamics even though they are a loving and supportive family?

Summary

Even though I have discussed the policy discourse within teaching and learning gender and sexuality, and gave my personal insights as to why the VDOE should make visible what is invisible within their heteronormative policy, I still have to praise the VDOE for making different alterations within FLE since 1987 via House and Senate bills and additional policies; however, there is still much work to be done. Virginia's FLE curriculum is outdated and needs to be altered to maintain recent, changing, and evolving societal norms. The curriculum should not make LGBTQ students feel oppressed or invisible within their school, district, community, or state.

CHAPTER SIX

IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

All data collection and analysis of the findings thus far allow us to reflect on the final research question: *What are the implications of findings for future educational policy and practice?* This chapter begins with implications of findings for future educational policy and practice. Then, recommendations for the VDOE policy are discussed. Finally, limitations and concluding thoughts are shared as well as suggestions for potential future research.

Implications for State and District Policy

Both state and district policies need to create clear guidelines for school officials and more universal policies, practices, and school-wide intervention plans (Weaver et al., 2013). This might be accomplished through multi-district cohesion and collaboration with state officials. This way, both policy and practice will gain alignment and lessen disconnectedness between the state and a local district as well as between districts. The district policies follow the state, but the state gives local educational agencies (LEAs) measures of freedom and leniency in some areas. Therefore, district leaders interpretations often influence what and how classroom teachers teach.

For example, when stating more universal policies and practices, all goals and terminology within FLE should be thoroughly detailed for all public school district employees. One example is the VDOE's use of *human sexuality*. It is mentioned within

the policy, however a specific definition for educators is needed. Also, the section within the BOE Guidelines where districts could include other materials also requires specification to decrease potential disconnects in perception and interpretation between districts.

Since most K-12 curriculum, instruction, and policies have been found to be heteronormative and gender conforming, FLE has the potential to create a safe and supportive environment for LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students, decrease stereotypes, and support inclusive lessons (Zook, 2016). "Queer people are absent from the curriculum and queer youth do not have any sort of significant support system aside from the GSA if the school has one" (Hackford-Peer, 2010, p. 547). Thus, policy makers should remember the overall goal is to avoid selective exclusion in terms of diversity learning.

Implications for Educator Preparation Programs

This study has reiterated the importance for all school faculty to increase knowledge and awareness about LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students. Awareness is needed for educators to understand this diverse group of students in addition to providing training on how educators can be active allies. Students should not feel rejected or isolated from their administrators, teachers, and counselors for any reason, especially for who they are. Rather, educators must become mindful of their teaching practices to give students voices and chances to succeed. This research has shown that leaving this to chance is not acceptable. Teachers, counselors, and administrators all lack professional development that can inform their interpretations of

policy and help them feel more comfortable and qualified to create FLE programs that are inclusive and meaningful.

Specifically, within professional development, programs could be created separately for principals, teachers, and/or counselors or an overall professional development could be provided to an entire faculty of educators. Professional development within the area of identity politics should specifically address how to discuss gender and sexuality with students and how to create an inclusive curriculum and classroom climate. However, topics specific to LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students could also be incorporated into existing professional development designed to strengthen teaching about tolerance and acceptance of others, celebrating diversity of all kinds, and modeling or going over examples as to how to make lesson plans and assignments more equitable.

In addition, schools of education should be developing teacher, counselor, and leadership preparation that inform and support educators' attempts to provide safe and supportive environments within schools for all students. This may also help promote the practice of mindfulness toward diverse students who do not follow typical stereotypes, as well as help educators intervene and respond to homophobic victimization (Kueny & Zirkel, 2012). Zacko-Smith & Smith (2010) urge us to remember that, "as educators, we are responsible, at least in part, for helping to counter these socially unjust understandings, helping to define and redefine students' attitudes regarding sexuality, gender, and sexual orientation" (p. 4).

Recommendations for SOLs and State Guidelines

In order to enhance knowledge, decrease oppression regarding gender identity and sexual orientation within Virginia's FLE curriculum, suggestions for recommendations are as follows:

1. Adapt the FLE SOLs so they are based on scientific input ranging in several disciplines such as social, behavioral, medical, and public health sciences (Schalet, 2014) to increase understanding around age appropriate teaching and learning (Canan & Jozkowski, 2016). Adapting the SOLs and policy based on scientific research could answer questions or concerns educators' or parents might have regarding the policy if there is research to back it up.

2. At the beginning of the VDOE policy document, provide a rich and descriptive description of the overall goal of the Family Life Education curriculum to help educators and community members understand the purposes of this particular curricular area.

3. Within the SOLs and guidelines, provide clear and easy to interpret definitions for policy terminology and SOL vocabulary, such as: comprehensive, gender, human sexuality, etc.

4. Allow for better gender terminology by avoiding the use of *men* and *women*; instead, use a variety of terms such as male, female, transgender, gender non-conforming, etc.

5. Thoroughly review the entire policy to decrease redundancy throughout. For instance, *comprehensive* and *marriage* are mentioned multiple times prior to the

SOLs. While mentioned often, there is a lack of clarity. In fact, some areas may need to be condensed to allow more detail and specificity in other sections.

6. The VDOE should be open and willing to work with federally-funded programs in order to address gender and LGBTQ youth in schools (Schalet, 2014).

7. The VDOE should be open to creating a FLE curriculum that is openly inclusive to various viewpoints (not just heteronormative) and populations without stigmatizing or stereotyping any group (Schalet, 2014).

8. Virginia's FLE policies must acknowledge the research around possible factors that create prejudice toward alternative gender identities and sexual orientation. (Schalet, 2014).

9. Tailored specifically to the VDOE FLE curriculum, there should be an increase in preparation programs as well as professional development to decrease any heteronormative loaded coursework and curriculum (Gorski, 2013).

10. Besides those who are required to have training to be FLE certified, provide educators (and fund) opportunities to take the training for their own personal and professional growth.

11. Create state guidelines that support more gay-straight alliances (GSAs) and safe spaces in all school levels that will help to construct a more welcoming and inclusive school environment. This could also be done through a supportive faculty, curriculum, and effective school bullying policies (Greytak et al., 2013). Aspects of the FLE curriculum can be guided by SOLs emphasizing respect and acceptance for others. Greytak et al., (2013) explain the importance of GSA's:

Youth population as a whole demonstrates the value of in school resources that specifically address LGBT issues, including gay–straight alliances (GSAs) or other student clubs, supportive educators, LGBT-inclusive curricula, and comprehensive anti-bullying/anti-harassment policies that include explicit protections based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. (p. 46)

Recommendations for Teaching FLE

1. When creating the Health Advisory Committee to go over the FLE curriculum in schools, provide opportunities for educators to share their perceptions and interpretations of the FLE SOLs prior to teaching. Some examples may include participation in a fishbowl discussion at a faculty meeting and/or school board meeting. Doing so may help administrators to emphasize specific guidelines and/or help colleagues reach toward a common, tangible goal.

2. Prior to teaching, discuss educator's perceptions and interpretations for altering FLE SOLs. Again, providing clearer, comprehensive guidelines for teachers to allow equity to be tangible. One example could be creating a teacher cohort that varies in teaching experience and viewpoints to allow more flexibility and open-mindedness.

3. Create allies for LGBTQ and gender non-conforming youth through the FLE curriculum not only within school faculty but also between students. Take advantage of the curriculum and incorporating it with school clubs and youth to enhance the school environment!

4. When developing lesson plans for the FLE curriculum, thoroughly look at the overall session to determine the aspects of the lesson that are equitable (or not) and will/not allow a child to feel isolated or discouraged. Also, encourage educators to reach out to each other if they are unsure if a lesson or a particular term, for example is equitable, thus, receiving assistance and support from peers.

5. When teaching lessons about respect and acceptance, show support to students who identify as LGBTQ or gender non-conforming by taking action against bullying and harassment, creating GSAs, and adding safe space stickers or posters visually located throughout the school building. The latter will positively alter a schools' climate and allow schools to feel safer, supportive, and more inclusive for LGBTQ students (Gorski, 2013).

6. Tanigawa et al. (2011) suggests having social support from parents, teachers, and peers. This could help create safer spaces throughout the home, school, and community. This can be discussed for those SOLs that involve parental involvement. Doing so may also enhance feelings towards a safe and supportive environment for all.

7. Prepare FLE teachers to field questions from students that relate to gender and sexuality so that they may more appropriately address them. Also, provide teachers with resources and positive options for answering questions they may not be fully prepared to answer.

8. Research how to utilize school counselors more effectively within the area of identity politics. If LGBTQ or gender non-conforming students have issues pertaining to realizing their identity, accepting their identity, or even feeling

rejected due to their identity, then a counselor should be qualified and capable to help an individual as a way to not only help with identity issues but to also aid in potentially decreasing short and long term mental health factors (Wood & Conley, 2014).

9. Look into school budgeting with more specificity. Are there enough school counselors per child to cover students and their needs? This is especially true when teaching and learning about Family Life Education because there will be times when a counselor will be needed to address or discuss a sensitive issue.

Recommendations for Urban Elementary School

The specific school under examination shows signs of progress within teaching and learning gender and sexuality within the elementary school years. For instance, the FLE certified teachers expressed how they do address certain issues such as family diversity and gender stereotypes even though the SOLs do not specifically mention these. Furthermore, a committee meets annually to go over the SOLs and curriculum and make sure they are following the VDOE Policy accordingly. Moreover, they do a great job of providing information to parents such as promoting a time for parents to view the materials and sending home information about opting out of FLE. As a whole, all of this promotes early awareness, acceptance, and respect for self and others.

I do have two recommendations for their consideration that may continue their advancement in equitable teaching and progress. First, I would recommend keeping classroom teachers in the know. All teachers, counselors, and FLE instructors expressed a desire for more inservice training and professional development opportunities. Since they are the people who spend the most time with students, they need to have access to

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the right information, teaching strategies, and resulting confidence to meet the needs of all students in their care.

Next, I learned that parents are invited to come and view the material, but it is on a Teacher Work Day when students are not in school. I wonder if this impedes parents coming in to view the material because of child care or work schedules. My second recommendation would be possibly changing the date and time as to when parents are invited to view the FLE materials. Maybe a table or room could be set up at Back to School Night or another evening when there is a high attendance of family members and parental involvement.

Concluding Thoughts

This research did possess limitations which I acknowledge. First, since this was a case study of a school district I currently have personal and professional connections to, participants may have chosen to disclose only information they feel I might approve of. That said, I also came to the setting with the assumption that participants acted authentically and answered questions as accurately as they could. The mere presence of the observer, while not a participant, might still influence participants' (teacher's pedagogical; student's behavior) choices. However, I felt many participants were more forthcoming during the interview process since we had built a relationship of trust over the years. Another limitation of conducting a case study is that findings cannot be generalized to other cases. However, there are lessons learned and recommendations given that may be transferable to other contexts.

What do I feel in my gut needs to happen? I optimistically believe that the VDOE should not be afraid to face critique and criticism by seriously reanalyzing the policy,

curriculum, and SOLs in order to adapt to our current state of progression towards acceptance and awareness and decrease the discourses. Yes, there will be those who will rebel and possess strong negative feelings but just like any other controversial subject area or topic, you cannot please everyone. Nevertheless, what you can do is celebrate diversity of students through more inclusive lessons to decrease oppression, victimization, and discrimination. If our country can legalize same-sex marriage, provide more bathroom rights concerning gender identity, grant adoption rights for non-heteronormative families, and end the "don't ask, don't tell" policy in the military, then schools should be ready, willing, and able to address these topics.

I believe feminists and queer theorists would agree that Virginia's FLE curriculum shows a lack of progress and requires updating as America's societal norms are changing. In one of my journal notes I questioned the name of the curriculum:

I wonder if they actually named it "Family Life" to make it appear "harmless" or not something parents should be worried or intimidated about. I wonder if using the name Family Life is worth it or if the name of the curriculum and standards altogether should be changed?

After all, the FLE curriculum goes well beyond the family unit: It includes healthy and positive choices, school environments, friendships, other healthy relationships, etc. Recall that Lapointe (2014) and Wilmot and Naidoo (2014) shed light on the progression and increasing acceptance of including sexual orientation and gender identity within school curriculum in other countries via textbooks, the creation of non-discriminative policies, and favoring the title, *Life Orientation Curriculum* (Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014). If other countries are willing to correct outdated social norms, why is the United States still

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lacking in this area? How can such a diverse country not be willing to fully embrace all citizens?

When I first began this research, I was shocked and disappointed by the lack of inquiry in this area, especially the younger elementary grade levels. As we have seen in recent news and social media, students in the early elementary school years have discussed changing their gender identity or expressing early feelings related to sexual orientation. The troubling lack of research made me want to pursue this research even more. The lack of research (and limited policies and practices) related to identity politics are signs that we are failing America's youth and that we need to find more inclusive ways to teach/learn sexuality/gender in our schools. I believe increasing inclusivity to incorporate LGBTQ issues has the potential to create more open-minded, global thinkers at a younger age, which in turn could also decrease peer victimization and homophobic bullying on students as they mature.

Educators should continue to understand the need for a safe and supportive environment for all students both physically and emotionally. This could be accomplished with research by seeing the need for an unbiased curriculum. This may help close the research gap involving bias-based victimization on LGBTQ or gender non-conforming students in terms of focusing on younger children rather than waiting until middle or high school. If we see issues of identity politics in the news on a daily to weekly basis, and children are being exposed to it through newsfeeds, commercials, social media, etc., then it is our job as educators to be prepared to answer questions students may have in a way that is both accurate and appropriate.

Even though I analyzed and interpreted Virginia's FLE curriculum, I am left with unanswered questions: What does the science say about what is considered age appropriate for children? Over the past two years researching, I was unsuccessful in finding empirical or theoretical studies (not even a simple theory or guide) that might aid educators to know what is considered age appropriate to teach children within FLE. Looking into the evidence regarding age appropriateness is certainly a topic of interest for further investigation.

Since the topics of LGBTQ, gender non-conforming students, and FLE curriculum are broad areas of research, there is an abundance of potential research ideas. For example, it would be interesting to understand how and why certain legislation passes while others do not by examining the discourse of state legislative bills as well as talking with representatives. Furthermore, not only looking into the "what" and "why" but also probing the "who" and "how." In addition, it would be helpful to dissect and analyze each grade level SOL for Kindergarten through twelfth grade to further explore the what the creators of these SOLs felt were both age and content appropriate. The K-12 SOLs could also be analyzed using queer theory to probe whether and to what extent heteronormative discourses may or may not pervade the FLE curriculum throughout the pipeline. Findings could be used to guide future advocacy efforts.

Another area ripe for further research is looking specifically at bullying and peer victimization in the early grades. We do not have empirical evidence into when bullying queer people emerges and what types of policies, practices, educator behaviors might mitigate the growth of peer victimization starting at the earliest age possible. In addition, there is insufficient research dealing with how and when stress, chronic stress, and

trauma emerges for LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students in early childhood.

There is no denying that all schools have students who are LGBTQ regardless whether

the community or educators involved acknowledge it or not. There is no better time than

the present to advocate for inclusive school environments at the earliest of ages so all

students feel safe and have a voice in their schools.

It is depressing to think we may not be able to completely abolish homophobic

bullying in America's public schools. However, by taking a stand, continuing to raise

awareness about the LGBTQ community, and endorsing equitable laws, policies, and

bullying prevention *beginning at the earliest ages of public schooling*, we can make an

impact and decrease the number of bullying and homophobic victimization incidences.

As advocates for social justice, we have the power to create positive changes in schools

for LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students. We have the power to be the change

our students want to see now and in the future!

Afterword

Since writing this dissertation, my school has chosen to adopt a new reading program. I was excited because this program veered away from basal readers and workbooks. Instead, this program encourages students to love reading and become better readers. Moreover, the program provides an abundance of books from different publishing companies, different topics of interest, and different reading levels to help satisfy all types of readers.

Interestingly enough, one of the publishing companies describes itself as a "publisher and distributor of children's books for children in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered families. Our mission is to publish and distribute books of integrity, depicting our children, our families and our friends in positive, loving ways in picture books and stories" (JacketFlap, 2017). When I found out that some of my colleagues had these books in their classroom, I became more than excited!

However, my recent excitement was quickly followed by dismay. At a recent meeting, we were asked to go through our book collection provided by the reading program and *take out any books from this particular publishing company*. Without hesitation, I practically leaped from my seat during the meeting and told the literacy specialist and administrator who were present: "This is my area of research and this is my dissertation!" I shared that I would be more than willing to meet with administration, look at the books, and go over the materials with them as I was so encouraged to take

advantage of this unexpected opportunity to provide a more equitable environment for our students. As of yet, I am still waiting to meet to discuss this further (from an equity and advocacy point of view) with my administration.

So as of late, I feel like these books will be banned due to discrimination against LGBTQ families. It's difficult to understand why this even had to be brought up in the first place. Personally, I did not find it a big deal and several other teachers showed similar interest and excitement in the possibilities these new books presented. I think asking teachers to pull books automatically turns it into a big deal. (Truly, this is a big deal for me now because I cannot have any of those books in my classroom collection).

Recently, teachers were directed to do a read aloud with students about injustice and unfairness, but only to use the preapproved books provided by the reading program. As I was going through the books I noticed the only topic covered dealt with books that race and skin color. While race is definitely an important part of learning about injustice, I was mortified to find that some of these early childhood books discussed the Ku Klux Klan and white supremacy! I was so angry that my school district felt more comfortable letting young children learn about terror and murder, than learning about the variety of families in our community! Apparently, it is more wholesome to learn about white supremacy than broach the subject of non-heteronormative families!

In my opinion, we should either look through each and every single book that was given to us, regardless of publisher or topic, to decide if they are developmentally and age appropriate for our particular students or simply leave them all alone. Singling out one publishing company because it focuses on the needs of LGBTQ families is an example of heteronormativism that should not be tolerated.

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Family Life Education

Board of Education Guidelines
and
Standards of Learning
for Virginia Public Schools

Commonwealth of Virginia
Department of Education
Richmond, VA 23218-2120

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FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION

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Table of Contents

CODE OF VIRGINIA
FOR FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION

§22.1-207.1. Family life education.

The Board of Education shall develop by December 1, 1987, standards of learning and curriculum guidelines for a comprehensive, sequential family life education curriculum in grades K through 12. Such curriculum guidelines shall include instruction as appropriate for the age of the student in family living and community relationships; the benefits, challenges, responsibilities, and value of marriage for men, women, and children, and communities; abstinence education; the value of postponing sexual activity; the benefits of adoption as a positive choice in the event of an unwanted pregnancy; human sexuality; human reproduction; dating violence; the characteristics of abusive relationships; steps to take to avoid sexual assault, and the availability of counseling and legal resources, and, in the event of such sexual assault, the importance of immediate medical attention and advice, as well as the requirements of the law; the etiology, prevention and effects of sexually transmitted diseases; and mental health education and awareness.

All such instruction shall be designed to promote parental involvement, foster positive self concepts and provide mechanisms for coping with peer pressure and the stresses of modern living according to the students' developmental stages and abilities. The Board shall also establish requirements for appropriate training for teachers of family life education, which shall include training in instructional elements to support the various curriculum components.

For the purposes of this section, "abstinence education" means an educational or motivational component which has as its exclusive purpose teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by teenagers' abstaining from sexual activity before marriage.

(1987, c. 371; 1999, c. 422; 2002, c. 554; 2004, c. 1030; 2007, c. 32.; 2008, c.0417; 2009, c.437, 583)

§ 22.1-207.2. Right of parents to review certain materials; summaries distributed on request.

Every parent, guardian or other person in the Commonwealth having control or charge of any child who is required by § 22.1-254 A to send such child to a public school shall have the right to review the complete family life curricula, including all supplemental materials used in any family life education program. A complete copy of all printed materials and a description of all audio-visual materials shall be kept in the school library or office and made available for review to any parent or guardian during school office hours before and during the school year. The audio-visual materials shall be made

available to parents for review, upon request, on the same basis as printed materials are made available.

Each school board shall develop and the parents or guardians of a student participating in the family life education program a summary designed to assist parents in understanding the program implemented in its school division as such program progresses and to encourage parental guidance and involvement in the instruction of the students. Such information shall reflect the curricula of the program as taught in the classroom. The school division shall include the following information on the summary:

"Parents and guardians have the right to review the family life education program offered by their school division, including written and audio-visual educational materials used in the program. Parents and guardians also have the right to excuse their child from all or part of family life education instruction."

(1989, c. 515; 1991, cc. 139, 526; cc. 0451; 2009, cc. 451)

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

In 1987, §22.1-207.1 of the *Code of Virginia* was amended to direct the Board of Education to develop standards of learning and curriculum guidelines for a comprehensive, sequential family life education (FLE) curriculum in grades K through 12. From February 1987 to December 1987, individuals from public schools (including administrators and teachers), state agencies, parent groups, and not-for-profit organizations that provided family life services contributed time, resources, and expertise to help develop a report to submit to the Virginia General Assembly. The report *Family Life Education: Board of Education's Response to House Bill No. 1413* included sections on the Board of Education guidelines for setting up a required FLE program, Standards of Learning objectives and descriptive statements for grades kindergarten through 12, guidelines for training individuals that teach FLE and for involving parents and community-based organizations in the local FLE program.

The FLE program was funded by the General Assembly during its 1988 session based on the plan developed by the Board of Education and the Department of Education. The program scheduled for implementation by all school divisions during the 1989-90 school year, provided guidance to localities in developing comprehensive, age-appropriate, and sequential instruction in specific content areas. Program flexibility allowed options for the local planning teams. The program could cover grades K through 10 or K through 12, depending upon the desires of a school division. School divisions were permitted to use state-approved Standards of Learning objectives or develop their own learner objectives. Educators identified as FLE teachers participated in in-depth staff development workshops over a two-year period.

Each school division was required to appoint a community involvement team to assist in the development of the program and to promote community involvement. The Board of Education guidelines were written to assure that parents had opportunities to review the program annually and to opt their children out of all or part of the program.

During the fall and winter of school year 1992-93, the Department of Education conducted a study of the FLE program in the Virginia public schools. The study resulted from an agreement between the 1992 General Assembly and the Department of Education. A self-report survey of FLE programs was repeated in 2004 and 2006. Results again indicated compliance with mandates and policies. Of the 132 school divisions serving students in the state, 120 divisions, or 91 percent, responded to the 2006 survey. Eighty-eight percent, or 105, of school divisions surveyed in 2006 offered FLE programming.

Also in 1992, the Virginia General Assembly amended §22.1-275.1 of the *Code of Virginia* to direct local school boards to establish a school health advisory board of no more than 20 members. The legislation specified that the local board shall consist of broad-based community representation including, but not limited to, parents, students,

health professionals, educators, and others. Many localities opted for their school health advisory board to also serve as the FLE community involvement team.

In September 1997, the *Regulations Establishing Standards for Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia (8 VAC 20-131-170)* were amended by the Board of Education to state that "Each school may implement the Standards of Learning for the Family Life Education program promulgated by the Board of Education or a Family Life Education program consistent with the guidelines developed by the Board of Education which shall have the goals of reducing the incidence of pregnancy and/or sexually-transmitted disease and substance abuse among teenagers."

The 1999 Virginia General Assembly amended §22.1-207.1 of the *Code of Virginia* and added "abstinence education" as a Family Life Education instructional topic to the content areas identified in 1987: "…family living and community relationships, the value of postponing sexual activity, human sexuality, human reproduction, and the etiology, prevention and effects of sexually transmitted diseases." The Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Department of Health cooperated to strengthen abstinence education staff development workshops.

House Bill 1206, passed by the 2002 Virginia General Assembly, required the Board of Education to include "the benefits of adoption as a positive choice in the event of an unwanted pregnancy" in its curriculum guidelines for a comprehensive, sequential Family Life Education curriculum. The bill also required the Board to specify that training of teachers of Family Life Education include training in instructional elements to support the various curriculum components.

House Bill 1015, passed by the 2004 Virginia General Assembly, required the Board of Education to include "steps to take to avoid sexual assault, and the availability of counseling and legal resources, and, in the event of such sexual assault, the importance of immediate medical attention and advice, as well as the requirements of the law" in its curriculum guidelines for a comprehensive, sequential Family Life Education curriculum.

House Bill 1916, passed by the 2007 Virginia General Assembly, required the Board of Education to include "dating violence and the characteristics of abusive relationships" in its curriculum guidelines for a comprehensive, sequential Family Life Education curriculum.

Senate Bill 640, passed by the 2008 Virginia General Assembly, required the Board of Education to include "mental health education and awareness" in its curriculum guidelines for a comprehensive, sequential Family Life Education curriculum.

House Bill 1746 and Senate Bill 827, passed by the 2009 Virginia General Assembly, required the Board of Education to include "benefits, challenges, responsibilities, and value of marriage for men, women, children, and communities" in its curriculum guidelines for a comprehensive, sequential Family Life Education curriculum.

House Bill 1980, also passed by the 2009 Virginia General Assembly, required school divisions to provide parents and guardians of students participating in a family life education program a summary to assist in understanding the program being implemented. The summary should include the following statement: "Parents and guardians have the right to review the family life education program offered by their school division, including written and audio-visual educational materials used in the program. Parents and guardians also have the right to excuse their child from all or part of family life education instruction."

In an effort to align with the *Student Conduct Policy Guidelines*, information regarding the appropriate use of electronic devices was also added to Family Life Education program in 2010.

A technical review of the *Guidelines and Standards of Learning for Family Life Education* was conducted in November of 2010 by a team of Family Life Education professionals. Nursing, education and public health representatives from the University of Virginia, Virginia Commonwealth University and George Mason University formed the team. Technical changes have been made to the standards to conform to current terminology.

In 2011, the Virginia General Assembly enacted the uncodified § 1 of Chapter 634 in the *Acts of the General Assembly* stating, "That any family life education curriculum offered by a local school division shall require the Standards of Learning objectives related to dating violence and the characteristics of abusive relationships to be taught at least once in middle school and at least twice in high school, as described in the Board of Education's family life education guidelines." The guidelines and standards, while in compliance with this legislation, have been revised, where appropriate, to further reflect this requirement.

House Bill 659, passed by the 2016 Virginia General Assembly, required the Virginia Board of Education to include objectives related to dating violence and the characteristics of abusive relationships at least once in middle-school and at least twice in high school, as described in the Board's family life guidelines. The 2016 revisions also included requirements in House Bill 659 that any high school family life education curriculum offered by a local school division incorporate age-appropriate elements of effective and evidence-based programs on the prevention of dating violence, domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and sexual violence.

BOARD OF EDUCATION GUIDELINES FOR FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION

BOARD OF EDUCATION GUIDELINES FOR FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION

I.   The following guidelines shall be followed in the implementation of the Board of Education's approved Family Life Education program.

   A.   A community involvement team, or school health advisory board, shall be identified and should include individuals such as a person from the central office, an elementary school principal, a middle school principal, a high school principal, teachers, a school board member, parents, one or more members of the clergy, a member of the medical profession, and others in the community.

   B.   There must be evidence of broad-based community involvement and an annual opportunity for parents and others to review curriculum and instructional materials prior to the beginning of actual instruction.

   C.   Those individuals selected by the localities to teach the Family Life Education program shall participate in the training program sponsored by the Department of Education.

   D.   Medical professionals and mental health professionals may be involved, where appropriate, to help teach the content of the Family Life Education curriculum and to serve as a resource to students and to parents.

   E.   Local training and follow-up activities shall involve the community in understanding and implementing the Family Life Education program.

   F.   Local agencies/organizations/support systems shall be identified and used as resources for the Family Life Education program.

   G.   An "opt-out" procedure shall be provided to ensure communication with the parent or guardian for permission for students to be excused from all or part of the program.

   H.   A plan for teaching sensitive content in gender-separated classes shall be announced publicly.

   I.   The *Family Life Education Standards of Learning* objectives approved by the Board of Education shall be used by the local school board. However, local school divisions may reassign the grade designation of the Standards of Learning objectives within grades K-6. The grade designation for objectives within grades 7-12 may be reassigned only one grade level, up or down. Also, the program may be adopted for kindergarten through grade 10 or kindergarten through grade 12; however, local scheduling of Family Life Education shall avoid any interruption or detraction from instruction in basic skills in elementary schools or in those courses required for graduation in the secondary schools.

   J.   The curriculum shall include education about those sections of statutory law applicable to instructional units relating to sexual conduct and misconduct and

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legal provisions relating to family life. This would include using any electronic devices to convey inappropriate behaviors and/or images.

K. The curriculum shall include mental health education and awareness as applicable to instructional units relating to family life.

L. The curriculum shall include information outlining the benefits, challenges, responsibilities, and value of marriage for men, women, children and communities.

II. The following guidelines shall be followed in the implementation of the Family Life Education program developed locally.

A. The Family Life Education program developed locally shall be comprehensive and sequential and include the following content areas and may include others at the discretion of the local school board:

1. Family living and community relationships;

2. The value of postponing sexual activity until marriage (abstinence education);

3. Human sexuality;

4. Human reproduction and contraception, including the benefits of adoption as a positive choice in the event of an unintended pregnancy;

5. The etiology, prevention, and effects of sexually transmitted infections;

6. Stress management and resistance to peer pressure;

7. Development of positive self-concepts and respect for others;

8. Parenting skills;

9. Substance use and abuse;

10. Child abuse;

11. Prevention of sexual assault and, in the event of sexual assault, the importance of receiving immediate medical attention and advice, knowledge of the requirements of the law, and use of resources such as counseling and legal services;

12. Dating violence and the characteristics of abusive relationships including using electronic devices to convey inappropriate images and behaviors;

13. Education about and awareness of mental health issues; and

14. The benefits of marriage.

B. The Family Life Education program developed locally shall include and adhere to the following:

1. A community involvement team, or school health advisory board, shall be identified and should include individuals such as a person from the central office, an elementary school principal, a middle school principal, a high school principal, teachers, a school board member, parents, one or more members of the clergy, a member of the medical profession, a mental health practitioner, and others in the community.

2. There must be evidence of broad-based community involvement and an annual opportunity for parents and others to review curriculum and instructional materials prior to the beginning of actual instruction.

3. Those individuals selected by the localities to teach the local Family Life Education program shall participate in the training program sponsored by the Department of Education. The training program shall include training in instructional elements to support the various curriculum components.

4. A Family Life Education leader from each grade level shall be identified to assist in training individuals who will be teaching, to work with a community involvement team or school health advisory board, and to assist in program implementation and evaluation.

5. Medical and mental health professionals may be involved, where appropriate, to help teach the content of the Family Life Education curriculum and to serve as a resource to students and to parents.

6. Local training and follow-up activities shall involve the community in understanding and implementing the Family Life Education program.

7. Local agencies/organizations/support systems shall be identified and used as resources for the Family Life Education program.

8. An "opt-out" procedure shall be provided to ensure communication with the parent or guardian for permission for students to be excused from all or part of the program.

9. A plan for teaching sensitive content in gender-separated classes shall be announced publicly.

10. Local scheduling of Family Life Education, to include kindergarten through grade 10 or kindergarten through grade 12, shall avoid any interruption or detraction from instruction in the basic skills in the elementary schools or in those courses required for graduation in the secondary schools.

11.   A local curriculum plan shall use as a reference the *Family Life Education Standards of Learning* objectives approved by the Board of Education and shall provide age-appropriate, medically-accurate instruction in relation to students' developmental stages and abilities.

12.   The curriculum shall include education about those sections of statutory law applicable to instructional units relating to sexual conduct and misconduct and legal provisions relating to family life.   This would include using any electronic devises to convey inappropriate behaviors and/or images. The information must be taught at least once during middle school and at least twice during high school.

13.   The curriculum shall include mental health education and awareness as applicable to instructional units relating to family life.

14.   The curriculum shall include information on the benefits, challenges, responsibilities, and value of marriage for men, women, children, and communities.

STANDARDS OF LEARNING OBJECTIVES AND DESCRIPTIVE STATEMENTS

STANDARDS OF LEARNING OBJECTIVES AND DESCRIPTIVE STATEMENTS
KINDERGARTEN

K.1   **The student will experience success and positive feelings about self.**
Descriptive Statement: These experiences are provided by the teacher through the climate of the classroom environment and include, but are not limited to, experiencing success in school, effectively handling routines, experiencing self-acceptance, and acceptance from others. Parents are encouraged to reinforce these positive experiences and feelings at home. Emphasis is placed on respect for differences.

K.2   **The student will experience respect from and for others.**
Descriptive Statement: Teachers and other adults at school actively listen to and accept feelings and opinions of the child. A classroom climate that encourages positive mental health development and protects the child from physical and emotional infringements by others is provided. The child also learns and practices courtesy and good manners.

K.3   **The student will become aware of the effects of his or her behavior on others and the effects of others' behavior on himself or herself.**
Descriptive Statement: The teacher uses appropriate descriptive language to explain to a child how his or her behavior affects others positively as well as negatively. The same descriptive language is used to explain to a child the effects of others' behavior on him or her. This approach is reinforced by other school personnel and parents are encouraged to continue such explanations at home. The child is introduced to the concept of privacy, especially in the use of bathroom facilities. In addition, the importance of avoiding gossip about others' personal or family problems is stressed. Concepts concerning electronic privacy, such as not sharing your name and address over the internet, are introduced.

K.4   **The student will recognize that everyone is a member of a family and that families come in many forms.**
Descriptive Statement: This includes a variety of family forms: two-parent families; extended families-relatives other than the immediate family living in the home; single-parent families; adoptive families; foster families or guardians; families with stepparents; and other blended families.

K.5   **The student will identify members of his or her own family.**
Descriptive Statement: This refers to identifying the adult and child members of the student's family.

K.6   **The student will develop an awareness of positive ways in which family members show love, affection, respect, and appreciation for each other.**
Descriptive Statement: The focus is on the appropriate words and actions that promote positive mental health development. Through words and actions which convey care, protection and guidance, such as touching, listening, hugging, praising, encouraging,

supporting, helping and playing, the child will understand that rules are made for safety, and protection.

K.7 **The student will realize that physical affection can be an expression of friendship, of celebration, or of a loving family.**
Descriptive Statement: It is important for the student to understand that appropriate expressions of affection are healthy for the individual, the family, and the community. The student will begin to understand the differences between appropriate and inappropriate expressions of affection.

K.8 **The student will recognize the elements of good (positive or healthy) and bad (negative or unhealthy) touches by others.**
Descriptive Statement: Elements of good touches by others are identified as follows: (1) touching that can be done in front of anyone; (2) touching that is not a secret; (3) touching that makes the child feel good and not uncomfortable; (4) touching that is done to provide cleaning or medical care for the child; and (5) touching that is an expression of affection by a family member. Bad touches by others include the following: (1) touching on private parts of the body; (2) touching to be kept secret; and (3) touching that could produce bad feelings.

K.9 **The student will demonstrate how to say "no" to inappropriate approaches from family members, neighbors, strangers, and others.**
Descriptive Statement: This involves learning how to say "no" in a loud voice while standing up and looking directly at the person. It is important for children to know that they should tell or report such happenings to a trusted adult such as a parent, teacher, minister, grandparent, or guardian. In addition, they should understand the need to continue telling about inappropriate approaches until someone listens and responds.

K.10 **The student will identify "feeling good" and "feeling bad."**
Descriptive Statement: Descriptive words are used to help the child identify pleasant and unpleasant feelings. Parents are encouraged to reinforce expressions of feelings at home and to work with the teacher in a team approach to achieving this, which encourages good mental health functioning.

K.11 **The student will find help safely.**
Descriptive Statement: Students will learn how to identify when they are in an unsafe environment. Students learn their full names, addresses, telephone numbers, and how to find reliable help if lost in a mall or other public place.

FIRST GRADE

1.1   The student will experience continuing success and positive feelings about self.
Descriptive Statement: The teacher continues to provide a classroom environment that fosters experiences of success in school work, in self-acceptance of body image, in the handling of routine situations, and in group activities. Parents are encouraged to reinforce successful experiences, self-esteem, and good mental health practices at home.

1.2   The student will experience continuing respect from others.
Descriptive Statement: Teachers and other adults at school continue active listening and acceptance of the feelings and opinions of the child, providing a classroom climate that protects the child from physical, mental and emotional infringement by others. Difficult situations, such as how to handle a bully on the playground, are discussed.

1.3   The student will become aware of the effects of his or her behavior on others and the effects of others' behavior on himself or herself.
Descriptive Statement: The teacher continues to use appropriate descriptive language to explain to a child how his or her behavior affects others both positively and negatively, and how others' behavior affects him or her. The child learns to respect others and their feelings, and practices good mental health behaviors. The student is made aware of any behavior on his or her part that causes others to have hurt feelings.

1.4   The student will develop an understanding of the importance of a family and of different family patterns.
Descriptive statement: The emphasis is on the need for loving parents, or other responsible adult(s) in the family, regardless of the type of family. The student advances from awareness of family forms at the kindergarten level to understanding the importance of the family and its various forms at the first-grade level. The following family patterns are included: two-parent families; extended families-relatives other than the immediate family living in the home; single-parent families; adoptive families; foster families; families with stepparent; and other blended families.

1.5   The student will identify family members and their responsibilities in contributing to the successful functioning of the family.
Descriptive Statement: The focus is on the tasks that must be performed in order for a family to function successfully. Examples of tasks are providing food; providing shelter; providing and caring for clothing; providing money for these and other necessities; providing love and caring, including meeting the needs of elderly or physically and mentally disabled family members; and providing for fun and play.

1.6   The student will realize that human beings and other mammals have babies and that the babies can be breast-fed.
Descriptive Statement: Content associated with this objective can be found in books, magazines, films, videos, and other materials, as approved by the school division. Pets

may be used to demonstrate mammalian behavior. Parents are encouraged to assist with this objective during the course of normal family activities.

1.7 The student will use correct terminology when talking about body parts and functions.
Descriptive Statement: Scientific terms such as urinate, bowel movement, penis, vulva, and breast will be introduced as they occur in daily activities and are not taught directly. Parents are encouraged to reinforce correct terminology at home.

1.8 The student will express his or her feelings of happiness, sadness, and anger to the teacher.
Descriptive Statement: Teachers help children on an individual basis to recognize and express their feelings of happiness, sadness, and anger. Children are assisted in dealing appropriately with their feelings. If matters of a private nature arise, teachers are urged to contact parents so they can take a team approach to individual student problems. Positive mental health practices will be utilized.

1.9 The student will become aware of appropriate behavior to use in dealing with his or her feelings.
Descriptive Statement: The focus is on helping the child understand that feelings are different from behavior. The teacher helps the child understand that while feelings do influence behavior, each person can control his or her own behavior and the ways feelings are expressed. It is important for the teacher to help the child know that all feelings are valid. Appropriate strategies for expressing feelings include exercise, games, direct verbalization, art, music, dance, play, storytelling, and creative drama. Positive mental health practices will be utilized.

1.10 The student will experience the logical consequences of his or her behavior.
Descriptive Statement: The child needs to have the opportunity to make developmentally appropriate choices in his or her daily living and to experience the outcomes (both positive and negative) of his or her choices. The foundation for responsible decision making and positive mental health at all ages involves being allowed to learn from one's choices. Examples of appropriate choices at this grade level include choosing from a list of appropriate foods, choosing from a variety of activities and learning centers, and choosing the sequence in which learning activities are completed. An example of an appropriate consequence would be to clean up a spilled beverage rather than to be punished for this.

1.11 The student will realize that physical affection can be an expression of friendship, of celebration, or of a loving family.
Descriptive Statement: The child is reminded that appropriate expressions of affection are important for individual and family well-being. The student will begin to understand the differences between appropriate and inappropriate expressions of affection and the impact on individual mental health.

1.12 **The student will demonstrate strategies for responses to inappropriate approaches from family members, neighbors, strangers, and others.**
Descriptive Statement: Elements of good (positive, healthy) and bad (negative, unhealthy) touching are reviewed, and methods of avoiding negative encounters are presented. Appropriate use of communication devices such as the phone and internet will be discussed. Children learn how to tell a trusted adult, such as a parent, teacher, minister, grandparent, or guardian, about such incidents when they occur.

SECOND GRADE

2.1   The student will recognize that everyone has strengths and weaknesses and that all persons need to be accepted and appreciated as worthwhile.
Descriptive Statement: The key idea is that all human beings are worthwhile and need to be accepted and appreciated as they are. The emphasis is on daily experiences in which children receive the message that they are worthwhile. In this environment the student is able to use his or her strengths to overcome weaknesses, to realize that not everyone has the same strengths and weaknesses, to change the things he or she can change, and to accept the things that cannot be changed. Care is taken to ensure that children view persons with a physical or mental disability as unique individuals with many strengths.

2.2   The student will realize that adults other than parents also provide care and support for children.
Descriptive Statement: Adults, other than parents, who provide care and support for children include foster parents; child-care providers; day-care teachers; extended family members; neighbors; family friends; and personnel of community support agencies, civic organizations, and religious organizations.

2.3   The student will become aware that babies grow inside the mother's body in a special place called the uterus.
Descriptive Statement: The purpose of this objective is to provide basic, age-appropriate, medically-accurate information; to demonstrate ease or comfort in talking about reproduction-related topics; and to correct misinformation.

2.4   The student will become aware of the need to take responsibility for the effects of his or her behavior on others.
Descriptive Statement: Through daily classroom experiences, the teacher can encourage children to express appreciation for positive peer behavior such as helping, sharing, being courteous, accepting others' opinions, and showing respect for others' possessions. When hurtful behavior occurs, children can be encouraged to make restitution by helping the victim solve the problem caused by the behavior. School personnel will use positive mental health practices to resolve problem behavior.

2.5   The student will demonstrate appropriate ways of dealing with feelings.
Descriptive Statement: Pleasant feelings (for example, those associated with success and praise) and unpleasant feelings (for example, those resulting from anger, rejection, isolation, and failure) are discussed. The student will begin to understand the characteristics of appropriate and inappropriate behavior as it relates to relationships. The concept of virtual relationships will be introduced. Appropriate behavior, in response to pleasant and unpleasant feelings, is practiced in pretend situations so that these desirable strategies are available when needed in real-life situations.

2.6   The student will realize that physical affection can be an expression of friendship, of celebration, or of a loving family.

Descriptive Statement: The teacher continues to reinforce the concept that appropriate expressions of affection are healthy for the individual and for the family. The student will recognize inappropriate expressions and demonstrate skills to correct inappropriate expressions.

2.7   The student will advance in readiness to say "no" and to tell a trusted adult, such as a parent, teacher, minister, grandparent, or guardian, in private about inappropriate approaches from family members, neighbors, strangers, and others.
Descriptive Statement: This is a review of the elements of good (positive, healthy) and bad (negative, unhealthy) touching, including how to handle inappropriate approaches. The student will understand the differences between appropriate and inappropriate expressions of affection and behavior, including the use of electronic devices to convey such feelings.

2.8   The student will be conscious of how commercials use our emotions to make us want products.
Descriptive Statement: Children are introduced to the concept of media influences, which is developed further at higher grade levels. The students are given examples of techniques used by the media to create excitement and a desire to purchase products. Students will begin to understand how the media affects mental health issues such as self-esteem or body image.

RESEARCH SUBJECT INFORMATION AND ADULT CONSENT FORM

TITLE: Identity Politics, State Standards, and on the Ground Realities: A Critical Policy Analysis of Teaching/Learning Gender/Sexuality in a Virginia Elementary Schools

VCU IRB NO.: HM20010274

INVESTIGATOR(S): Katherine Mansfield, VCU Assistant Professor & Research Supervisor; Stefanie Hudson, VCU Doctoral Candidate

This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask me to explain any words that you do not clearly understand. You may take home an unsigned copy of this consent form to think about or discuss with family or friends before making your decision.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research is to determine what is considered to be age appropriate within the Virginia Standards of Learning for Family Life Education. Participants perceptions will be compared to policy intentions to determine where the discourse differs or agrees and the implications there of. You are being asked to participate because you either are: (1) a teacher, (2) an administrator, or (3) a school counselor at this school. Your participation in interviews will contribute to a better understanding of how practicing educators perceive teaching and learning Family Life Education (FLE) during the elementary school years and how their opinions might agree or disagree with Virginia policy.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR INVOLVEMENT

If you decide to be in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form after you have had all your questions answered and understand what will happen to you. In this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview that will last approximately thirty minutes to one hour. The interviews will be audio recorded to help me remember what you say.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Risks of being in the study are highly unlikely, and if so are minimal and expected to be no greater than everyday life. However, participants may become uncomfortable sharing their perspectives and opinions. Thus, participants can decline to answer any question as well as withdraw from the study at any time.

BENEFITS TO YOU AND OTHERS

You will not get any direct benefit from this study, but the information learned from people in this study may help The Virginia Department of Education and other Virginia educators make informed decisions concerning when and how elementary students learn what is required in the Standards of Learning.

ALTERNATIVES

The alternative is to not participate in this study.

COSTS

There are no costs for participating in this study other than the time you will spend in the interviews.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Data is being collected only for research purposes. Your data will be identified by pseudonyms, not names. Printed data will be stored in a locked research area. All electronic data storage will be password protected. The data collected, along with the key that identifies individuals' names and pseudonyms, will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's locked office. The interviews will be audio recorded, but no names will be recorded. Recordings of interviews will be destroyed immediately following transcription. Transcriptions will only use pseudonyms. Access to all data will be limited to study personnel. We will not tell anyone the answers you give us; however, information from the study and the consent form may be examined by Virginia Commonwealth University. Personal information about you might be shared with or copied by authorized officials of the Department of Health and Human Services or other federal regulatory bodies. Findings from this study may be presented at meetings or published in papers, but your name will never be used in these presentations or papers. Findings and recommendations made as a result of this study will be presented to Virginia Commonwealth University upon completion. However, individual participants' identities will not be disclosed.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You do not have to participate in this study. If you choose to participate, you may stop at any time without any penalty. You may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the interview.

QUESTIONS

In the future, you may have questions about your participation in this study. If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, contact: Dr. Katherine Mansfield at [*personal contact information*]. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact:

Office for Research Integrity and Ethics
Virginia Commonwealth University
800 East Leigh Street, Suite 3000
Approved by the VCU IRB on 1/7/2016
P.O. Box 980568
Richmond, VA 23298
Telephone: 804-827-2157

Additional information about participation in research studies can be found at
http://www.research.vcu.edu/human_research/volunteers.htm

CONSENT

I have been given the chance to read this consent form. I understand the information about this study. Questions that I wanted to ask about the study have been answered. My signature says that I am willing to participate in this study. I will receive a copy of the consent form once I have agreed to participate.

_____
Name of Adult Participant (Printed)

_____   _____
Adult Participant Signature   Date

_____
Name of Person Conducting Informed Consent/Witness (Printed)

_____   _____
Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent/Witness   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Principal Investigator   Date

Approved by the VCU IRB on 5-12-17

APPENDIX C

Semi-structured Interview Protocol for Teachers

Introduction: Today's interview is going to consist of several open-ended questions and follow up questions which I provided to you via email. I would like to be flexible and conversational, so we may deviate somewhat from the questions I have provided as the interview proceeds. For the purposes of confidentiality, please try to avoid using names, instead use job titles. Do you have any questions? With your permission I'll start the audio recording now.

Teacher Open-Ended/Semi-Structured Interview Questions:
(additional prompts denoted by bullets)

1. I would like to begin by asking general questions about yourself as well as your background in elementary education.
   - When did you graduate from high school?
   - Where did you grow up?
   - How many years have you been an educator?
   - Where did you go to college?
   - What is your highest level of education?
   - Tell me your teaching credentials/certifications.

2. What does it mean for a school to be a safe and supportive environment for all?
   - Describe how your school maintains a safe and supportive environment for students who identify as non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming.

3. When bullying occurs, what and whom does it pertain to most often?
   - Specifically, how prevalent is bullying toward students who are gender non-conforming or struggling with self-identity?
   - If positive response: Why do you think this specific population of students are targeted or bullied in your school?
   - If negative response: "As I'm sure you are aware, bullying LGBTQ students is a problem across the United States. Why do you think this specific population of students are targeted or bullied in schools?

4. If and when bullying or peer victimization occurs, how do you utilize your…
   - Administrators?
   - Counselors?

5. Do you handle the situation differently depending on what type of bullying has occurred?
   - If so, how?
   - If not, why not?

6. As a teacher, how would you respond to the following?
    - A child bullied for looking too masculine or feminine
    - A child bullied or questioned as to why they have two mommies/daddies
    - A student wanting to use the boys'/girls' restroom because they want to identify as that gender.

7. Do you feel comfortable and/or qualified addressing issues associated with sexuality or gender identity? Why or why not?

8. Are the faculty (counselors, administrators) you work with comfortable and/or qualified to address issues associated with sexuality or gender identity? Why or why not?

9. If applicable, please describe occasions when a pupil showed non-stereotypical, nonconforming behavior, or interest in others?
    - Were these students subjected to any kind of bullying or victimization from their peers at school?
    - If so, how did you react?

10. What are your feelings toward teaching the Virginia Family Life curriculum at the elementary grade levels?
    - In your professional opinion, is it comprehensive? Why or why not?
    - In your professional opinion, is it age appropriate? If so, how? If not, describe.
    - What are some specific ways the state curriculum enables (or prevents) educators meeting students' needs and readiness?

11. Do you believe the SOLS for FLE are age appropriate? Why/why not?
    - Negative response: If you could, how would you alter the SOLs to make them more age appropriate?

12. Do you believe the SOLS for FLE adequately address:
    - non-heteronormative family structures?
    - non-heteronormative sexuality in general?
    - children who identify as non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming?
    - children who have a non-heteronormative family structure?
    - gender stereotypes?
Why/why not?
Negative responses: If you could, how would you alter the SOLs to make them more conducive to discussions around:
    - non-heteronormative family structures?
    - non-heteronormative sexuality in general?
    - children who identify as non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming?
    - children who have a non-heteronormative family structure?
    - gender stereotypes?

13. Do you think your personal background contributes to these perceptions? If so, how?

14. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

APPENDIX D

Semi-structured Interview Protocol for Counselors

Introduction: Today's interview is going to consist of several open-ended questions and follow up questions which I provided to you via email. I would like to be flexible and conversational, so we may deviate somewhat from the questions I have provided as the interview proceeds. For the purposes of confidentiality, please try to avoid using names, instead use job titles. Do you have any questions? With your permission I'll start the audio recording now.

School Counselor Open-Ended/Semi-Structured Interview Questions:
(additional prompts denoted by bullets)

1. I would like to begin by asking general questions about yourself as well as your background in elementary education.
   - When did you graduate from high school?
   - Where did you grow up?
   - How many years have you been an educator?
   - Where did you go to college?
   - What is your highest level of education?
   - Tell me your teaching credentials/certifications.

2. What does it mean for a school to be a safe and supportive environment for all?
   - Describe how your school maintains a safe and supportive environment for students who identify as non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming.

3. When bullying occurs, what and whom does it pertain to most often?
   - Specifically, how prevalent is bullying toward students who are gender non-conforming or struggling with self-identity?
   - If positive response: Why do you think this specific population of students are targeted or bullied in your school?
   - If negative response: "As I'm sure you are aware, bullying LGBTQ students is a problem across the United States. Why do you think this specific population of students are targeted or bullied in schools?

4. If and when bullying or peer victimization occurs, how do you utilize your…
   - Administrators?
   - Teachers?

5. Do you handle the situation differently depending on what type of bullying has occurred?
   - If so, how?
   - If not, why not?

6. As a counselor, how would you respond to the following?
   - Bullied for looking too masculine or feminine
   - Bullied or questioned as to why he/she has two mommies/daddies
   - A student wanting to use the boys'/girls' restroom because they want to identify as that gender.

7. Do you feel comfortable and/or qualified addressing issues associated with sexuality or gender identity? Why or why not?

8. Are the faculty you work with comfortable and/or qualified to address issues associated with sexuality or gender identity? Why or why not?

9. If applicable, please describe occasions when a pupil showed non-stereotypical, nonconforming behavior, or interest in others?
   - Were these students subjected to any kind of bullying or victimization from their peers at school?
   - If so, how did you react?

10. What are your feelings toward teaching the Virginia Family Life curriculum at the elementary grade levels?
    - In your professional opinion, is it comprehensive? Why or why not?
    - In your professional opinion, is it age appropriate? If so, how? If not, describe.
    - What are some specific ways the state curriculum enables (or prevents) educators meeting students' needs and readiness?

11. Do you believe the SOLS for FLE are age appropriate? Why/why not?
    - Negative response: If you could, how would you alter the SOLs to make them more age appropriate?

12. Do you believe the SOLS for FLE adequately address:
    - non-heteronormative family structures?
    - non-heteronormative sexuality in general?
    - children who identify as non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming?
    - children who have a non-heteronormative family structure?
    - gender stereotypes?

Why/why not?
Negative responses: If you could, how would you alter the SOLs to make them more conducive to discussions around:
    - non-heteronormative family structures?
    - non-heteronormative sexuality in general?
    - children who identify as non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming?
    - children who have a non-heteronormative family structure?
    - gender stereotypes?

13. Do you think your personal background contributes to these perceptions? If so, how?

14. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

APPENDIX E

Semi-structured Interview Protocol for Administrators

Introduction: Today's interview is going to consist of several open-ended questions and follow up questions which I provided to you via email. I would like to be flexible and conversational, so we may deviate somewhat from the questions I have provided as the interview proceeds. For the purposes of confidentiality, please try to avoid using names, instead use job titles. Do you have any questions? With your permission I'll start the audio recording now.

Administrator Open-Ended/Semi-Structured Interview Questions:
(additional prompts denoted by bullets)

1. I would like to begin by asking general questions about yourself as well as your background in elementary education.
   - When did you graduate from high school?
   - Where did you grow up?
   - How many years have you been an educator?
   - Where did you go to college?
   - What is your highest level of education?
   - Tell me your teaching credentials/certifications.

2. What does it mean for a school to be a safe and supportive environment for all?
   - Describe how your school maintains a safe and supportive environment for students who identify as non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming.

3. When bullying occurs, what and whom does it pertain to most often?
   - Specifically, how prevalent is bullying toward students who are gender non-conforming or struggling with self-identity?
   - If positive response: Why do you think this specific population of students are targeted or bullied in your school?
   - If negative response: "As I'm sure you are aware, bullying LGBTQ students is a problem across the United States. Why do you think this specific population of students are targeted or bullied in schools?

4. If and when bullying or peer victimization occurs, how do you utilize your…
   - School counselors?
   - Teachers?

5. Do you handle the situation differently depending on what type of bullying has occurred?
   - If so, how?
   - If not, why not?

6. As an administrator, how would you respond to the following?
    - Bullied for looking too masculine or feminine
    - Bullied or questioned as to why they have two mommies/daddies
    - A student wanting to use the boys'/girls' restroom because they want to identify as that gender.

7. Do you feel comfortable and/or qualified addressing issues associated with sexuality or gender identity? Why or why not?

8. Are the faculty (teachers, counselors) you work with comfortable and/or qualified to address issues associated with sexuality or gender identity? Why or why not?

9. If applicable, please describe occasions when a pupil showed non-stereotypical, nonconforming behavior, or interest in others?
    - Were these students subjected to any kind of bullying or victimization from their peers at school?
    - If so, how did you react?

10. What are your feelings toward teaching the Virginia Family Life curriculum at the elementary grade levels?
    - In your professional opinion, is it comprehensive? Why or why not?
    - In your professional opinion, is it age appropriate? If so, how? If not, describe.
    - What are some specific ways the state curriculum enables (or prevents) educators meeting students' needs and readiness?

11. Do you believe the SOLS for FLE are age appropriate? Why/why not?
    - Negative response: If you could, how would you alter the SOLs to make them more age appropriate?

12. Do you believe the SOLS for FLE adequately address:
    - non-heteronormative family structures?
    - non-heteronormative sexuality in general?
    - children who identify as non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming?
    - children who have a non-heteronormative family structure?
    - gender stereotypes?

Why/why not?

Negative responses: If you could, how would you alter the SOLs to make them more conducive to discussions around:
    - non-heteronormative family structures?
    - non-heteronormative sexuality in general?
    - children who identify as non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming?
    - children who have a non-heteronormative family structure?
    - gender stereotypes?

13. Do you think your personal background contributes to these perceptions? If so, how?

14. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Recruitment email script via in-person interview for teachers, counselors, administrators.

RECRUITMENT EMAIL:

Address Line: Will individually email participants limited to educators (teachers, administrators, and counselors) in Hugh Mercer Elementary School.

Subject Line: Research Participation: Identity Politics and Family Life Education

Message:
Dear [*Name*],

My name is Stefanie Hudson, and I am a current doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership at Virginia Commonwealth University. I am working on my dissertation under the direction of Dr. Katherine Mansfield. I have chosen to study the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs) for Family Life Education (FLE). The project has three main purposes. First, I would like to understand how the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) views appropriate family life content as well as the age in which various concepts should be introduced to students. Second, I hope to learn more about how teachers/counselors/principals (will choose appropriate noun based on recipient) perceive the appropriateness and effectiveness of the VDOE FLE curriculum and how that might influence their teaching. Finally, I would like to compare the policies around FLE with educators' perceptions.

I value your professional opinion and would find your contributions helpful. Would you be willing to participate in a 30-60-minute interview with me? If so, I am happy to work around your busy schedule as well as willing to meet off campus if you prefer additional privacy. Please, know that everything you share will be held in strictest confidence. I will never share what you say with others or publish your answers without using a pseudonym.

Please, let me know if you are interested in participating. If you are, I will e-mail you a copy of the interview questions and consent form in advance so that you might ask me questions before committing to an interview.

Thank you for your consideration,
Stefanie Hudson
VCU Doctoral Candidate
[*provided personal contact information*]

This study (IRB # HM20010274) was approved by the VCU IRB on 5-12-17.

If you have questions or concerns you may contact me or my faculty advisor, Dr. Katherine Mansfield at kcmansfield@vcu.edu. If you have any questions about research participant's rights, you can also contact the VCU IRB Board at erahelp@vcu.edu

Family Life Education will be taught at [*Name of School*] this winter.   Lessons will be delivered to all students through the Health and Physical Education Department. Some lessons will be split by gender. Curriculum for the lessons is available for parent review. School Board Policy IGAH states:

"Parents and guardians have the right to review the family life education program offered by their school division, including written and audio-visual educational materials used in the program. Parents and guardians also have the right to excuse their child from all or part of family life education instruction."

If you wish for your child NOT to receive family life instruction, please, complete the opt-out notice below. Opt-out forms should be returned no later than February 8, 2017.

[*Name of School*]
Family Life Opt-Out Notice
2016-2017

As the parent/guardian of _____, I do
(Student Name Here)
NOT want my child to participate in family life education classes. My Child is

in_____ in_____class.
  (Grade)   (Teacher's Name)

_____I have reviewed the grade level curriculum.

_____ I do not want my child to participate in any of the family life lessons.

Parent Guardian Signature: _____

Date: _____

Phone #. _____

If you wish to opt your child out of these lessons, return this form to the PE Department by February 8, 2017.

APPENDIX H

Copy of a Family Life lesson plan utilized within the school

Teacher: [*Name of FLE Certified Teacher*]

Department: Health

Grade Level: K-2

Rotation Start Date: February 13, 2017   **Rotation End Date:** February 23, 2017

OBJECTIVE:
 1. Execute "Health" lesson (1st grade) *INTEGRATED*
MATERIALS:
First Grade: Active Board, Computer, *It's your body, you're in charge* DVD

DESCRIPTION OF LESSON
OBJECTIVE 1 (1st grade only): Health SOL: 1.6, 1.7, and 1.12

ACTIVITIES AND PROCEDURES:
Health
Begin by telling students that you are going to have a mature conversation today. Give clear guidelines of what is expected. Remove any students that aren't going to be able to handle the subject manner. Ask students to think about ways that boys and girls are the same. Then, ask them to think of ways that they are different. Tell them you are going to show them a video that talks a little bit more about ways boys and girls are different. Show video.

Separate students by gender. Send the girls with the substitute teacher to play "Simon says" outside the classroom in the hallway with a Substitute Teacher or Paraprofessional. Keep the boys in the classroom to discuss these differences further. Introduce the following vocabulary: urinate, bowel movement, penis and breast (refer to breast feeding as mammalian behavior). Students with questions should talk to their parents for more information. Give the substitute teacher the boys and repeat the discussion with the girls.

Similarities: urinate, bowel movement   Differences: penis, breast, vulva

DIFFERENTIATION:
Vocabulary
- Touch
- Urinate
- Bowel movement
- Penis
- Breast
- Vulva

ASSESSMENT: Are students able to act appropriately during discussion and video?
HOMEWORK: Questions may be asked to parents.

Vita

Stefanie Robin Hudson was born January 28, 1986, in Brooklyn, New York, and is an American citizen. She graduated from West Islip High School, West Islip, New York in 2004. She received her Bachelor of Arts in English in 2008 and her Master of Arts in Childhood Education in 2009 from Adelphi University, Garden City, New York. Stefanie is currently an elementary school teacher in Virginia for the past seven years within the same school district.