

# **No Homo, Bro: Sexuality And Its Perception in the High School Environment**

Jacob Cole  
Department of Education  
Luther College  
700 College Drive  
Decorah, Iowa 52101

Faculty Advisor: Jill Leet-Otley

## **Abstract**

Sexuality is a facet of diversity garnering significant attention in recent years. Events such as the June 2015 Supreme Court ruling on marriage equality and the massacre at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, FL, less than one year later have raised questions and concerns within the field of education; mainly, how can educators as a group and society as a whole better provide for LGBTQ+ students? This study looks at sexuality and its perception in the high school environment, considering both how does the perception of sexuality affect students throughout their high school experience and what can emerging teachers do to make their classrooms more accepting and welcoming for LGBTQ+ students. Interviews were conducted with 12 college students, both LGBTQ+ and straight, asking them to reflect on their high school experience and how sexuality and its perception played into that experience. These students were selected through snowball sampling with the goal of interviewing students with different backgrounds and upbringings. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using grounded theory. The analysis and presentation of the material is built on common themes found in the interviews, using frameworks of gender and queer theory to break down binaries and consider identity on a spectrum. Results suggest that while sexuality is not a topic that is talked about frequently, its implications run deep and affect students' perceptions of themselves and others on a subconscious level. Additionally, results point to the effects of location and religion on perception of sexuality and how these outside factors influence students' views of themselves and others. This first-hand data will be useful in future classrooms to help create an accepting, welcoming environment for LGBTQ+ students while also recognizing that their sexuality is not their one defining characteristic.

**Keywords: Sexuality, Perception, High School**

## **1. Introduction**

Sexuality is a facet of diversity garnering significant attention in recent years. Events such as the 2015 Supreme Court ruling on marriage equality and the massacre at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, FL, less than one year later have raised questions and concerns across the nation about LGBTQ+ rights. Within education, these questions are focused on how educators and society can better provide for LGBTQ+ students. This study looks at sexuality and its perception in high school, considering how the perception of sexuality affects students throughout high school and what teachers can do to make their classrooms more accepting for LGBTQ+ students. As a secondary education student and future high school educator, this research is relevant to both my future as an educator and the students in my future classroom, whether they are queer, straight, or still learning who they are.

## 2. Literature Review and Methodology

Queer theory and its implications, especially in the educational field, played a large part in the research conducted and the analysis of the findings. However, a more general understanding of what queer theory is was required before the unpacking of queer theory and its relations to education could begin with the research. Annamarie Jagose's work on queer theory as well as Katherine Watson's analysis of the theory are what shaped understanding of queer theory and its relation to educational practice throughout the research process and provided the theoretical framework needed in order to proceed with the research. Jagose's work aided in situating a definition of queer and its focus on identity mismatches into the interview findings; this definition grew to include methods of questioning desire in reading Watson's analysis.

The biggest question present while beginning this research was in relation to queer theory and its presence in the educational field. Queer theory is largely prevalent in sociology and sociological research and also pairs easily with women and gender studies and related studies. But what place, if any, does queer theory have within the educational field? This is where Mayo's work on LGBTQ youth and education comes into play. Mayo's research built a large portion of my analysis and helped to position the research within both queer theory and education. However, research on queer theory in education only unpacks one side of queer students in schools - the ideological and theorized side of their experience. While research on queer theory and its presence in education is beneficial, it does not tell the whole story. In studying sexuality and its perception, educators have to look to students and how their sexuality is perceived in order to understand on a deeper level how perception of sexuality affects high school.

Queer theory is characterized by "a variety of methods of questioning desire and its relationship to identity"<sup>1</sup>, with critical questions such as who do I desire, how do I express my desire for them, and how do I place my desire within my identity shaping student identity throughout high school. This framework and its applications not only shaped a personal response to the interviews conducted with students, but will also shape my future classroom and how I provide for LGBTQ+ students.

### 2.1 Definitions

Throughout the course of this paper, there will be terms used frequently relating to sexuality and its perception in the high school environment. To avoid confusion with previous understandings and nuanced backgrounds of vocabulary, it is helpful to define these key words and how they will be used throughout the research. LGBTQ+ is an extended acronym of the popular "LGBT" and stands for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others." It will be used throughout this paper as an inclusive term to represent the queer community as a whole with the goal of not excluding any identities that might not fall under the typical LGBT umbrella. The term "cisgender" is used to denote people whose gender identity matches with their biological sex as determined at birth; this is used in contrast with those who identify as "transgender," or people whose gender identity does not match with their biological sex as determined at birth.

A large component of this research stems from societal heteronormativity. As used in this research, to claim something as "heteronormative" or to cite "heteronormativity" in the educational setting refers to the idea and assumption that straight is the assumed norm. Heteronormativity implies that all individuals are straight until they say otherwise. The act of an individual announcing their sexuality as something that is not straight is often termed "coming out of the closet." This phrase comes from the idea that people who identify as not straight must hide their true identity until they feel comfortable enough to come out and make a public statement about their sexuality.

A correlating aspect of heteronormativity is homophobia and its underlying presence in society. The word itself stems from having a phobia or an intense fear of something, however homophobia is more than just an intense fear of homosexual people. "Homophobia" will be defined in this research as a dislike of or prejudice against members of the LGBTQ+ community. This dislike or prejudice could result in discriminatory treatment, refusal to respect an individual's requested identity, or hate crimes committed against someone in the LGBTQ+ community. Homophobia is unique in this research in that it can be both externalized and internalized; while an individual, particularly an educator, might not be outwardly homophobic, they could have internalized homophobia that affects their actions and how they treat members of the LGBTQ+ community in their classroom.

### 2.2 Methodology

For this study, interviews were conducted with 14 college students asking them to reflect on their high school experience and how sexuality and its perception played into that experience. These interviews were recorded and

transcribed to pull out key phrases and answers from the student responses. These students were selected through snowball sampling with the goal of interviewing students with various sexualities, backgrounds and upbringings. The analysis and presentation of the material is built on common themes found in interviews and research, using frameworks of queer theory to shape the research and its takeaways. Once transcription of the interviews occurred, all responses were organized first by question number - responses to the first question grouped together, responses to the second question grouped together, and so on. Once that had occurred, further analysis was conducted to codify the responses based on prominent themes and to group responses together by theme rather than by question. From this codification, four main themes continued to emerge across the interviews: religion and religious background, heteronormativity in the school environment, the idea of and behind coming out of the closet, and stereotypes of the LGBTQ+ community.

In addition to the four main themes that emerged from the interview results, there was an intentional effort to ask questions and garner responses related to educational experience as a result of these four themes. All four themes mentioned above affected the educational experience of LGBTQ+ students in some way. As such, educational experience is more of an overarching theme of the research rather than its own subset. Additionally, the theme of educational experience played a much larger role in the analysis of findings than the codified themes did; while the themes of religion, heteronormativity, etc. influenced the resulting experience of these students, it is their experience in high school and their reflections on that experience that drove the analysis and how this research can and will be used to shape future educational practices.

To be queer is to defy the norm. In a way, this essay is queer because it defies the norms of a standard research paper and analysis. In the findings section, each topic will begin with excerpts from the interviews. The questions will be italicized followed by a juxtaposition of direct responses from selected interviewees. The analysis of each section will follow the excerpts from the interviews. For confidentiality purposes, all names used in this paper are pseudonyms; any resemblance between the pseudonym and an actual person with the same name is purely coincidental.

### 2.3 Interview Questions

These are the questions asked in all student interviews. Questions 2, 3, and 9 were posed exclusively to students in the LGBTQ+ community, whereas all other questions were asked to all students. The questions that asked LGBTQ+ students specifically about their sexuality were phrased to focus on sexuality more generally when asked to straight students in their interviews.

1. Did the perception of your sexuality by others affect you, your education, and/or your educational experience? If so, how?
2. Have you ever felt the need to play into the role of a sexuality/identity other than that with which you identify in order to “fit in” at school or to avoid being called out by teachers/peers/others?
3. Did the idea of “coming out of the closet” play into/affect your perception of sexuality in general, yourself and/or your sexuality? If so, how?
4. Did general statements and opinions about sexuality affect you, your education, and/or your educational experience? If so, how?
5. How did outside influences (television, internet, religious entities, etc.) influence your understanding of sexuality while you were in high school? How has that understanding changed in college?
6. Did the culture of your hometown or the region where you grew up affect your understanding of yourself and/or your sexuality? How did it play a positive/negative role in your understanding of sexuality?
7. What was the culture surrounding sexuality like at your high school? How did that culture impact the school environment and culture of the school as a whole?
8. Can you describe a time when you felt comfortable in your sexuality in the classroom or educational environment? Can you describe a time when you felt uncomfortable in your sexuality?
9. If you were to pick one thing that would have made your high school experience better in relation to sexuality and its perception, what would that thing have been?
10. What is one thing you wish people at your high school knew about you and/or your sexuality?
11. If there was one piece of advice you could give to members of the LGBTQ+ community at your high school, what would it be?
12. If there was one thing you could tell those NOT a part of the LGBTQ+ community at your high school that you wish they knew, what would it be?

### 3. Findings

The definition of “queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender, and desire.”<sup>2</sup> It dances around the need to conform to the seemingly mandatory heteronormative identity that society demands. LGBTQ+ students in high school have an extra challenge of balancing their sexual identity with their identity at school. Where being anything but “normal” is bad, these identities often do not and cannot line up, affecting perception of sexuality and the experience of LGBTQ+ students in high school. Research showed that four primary issues affecting LGBTQ+ students in high school are religion and religious backgrounds, pervasive heteronormativity in schools, the idea of coming out of the closet, and stereotypes that the LGBTQ+ community combat on a daily basis.

#### 3.1 Religion And Religious Backgrounds

*Did the perception of your sexuality by others affect you, your education, or your educational experience?*

I went to a religious middle school and had to stand up and say “God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.”

*Did general statements and opinions about sexuality affect you, your education, or your educational experience?*

It was very much “pray the gay away” and “gays go to hell.” It put a negative light on the school.

When you heard about it, it was in a very negative context. It was not talked about unless it was negative.

The First Amendment to the Constitution states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”<sup>3</sup> So how can religion affect LGBTQ+ students in high school? Just because public schools are not allowed to impose religion does not mean that religion cannot play a role in education, especially at private schools that regulate what they teach and how they teach it. For Emily, who went to a private school, she recalls that her school “had a very ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ mentality about sexuality as a whole... the thought was ‘You’re not married so we’re not going to talk about it’.”<sup>4</sup> Even though the LGBTQ+ community is gaining visibility and acceptance, some religious groups feel the need to guard against this group of people asserting its identity against heterosexism and homophobia.<sup>5</sup> Even in the 21st century where acceptance and tolerance is becoming more commonplace, there are still places in the United States where religion dictates the opinion of the populace and presents the LGBTQ+ community in a negative light.

While homophobia is not solely based on religion, it plays a large part in the homophobia students experience. People have expressed fear that their “religious freedom is being violated by inclusionary curricular changes,”<sup>6</sup> that discussing queer families and individuals in lessons will bring sex into the classroom, and that implementing gay-straight alliances, or GSAs, in schools will offend religious traditions.<sup>7</sup> This problem is only exacerbated at private schools, where other sexualities are never discussed. As Maddie described in her interview, “being anything besides heterosexual was not even thought of as a reality.”<sup>8</sup> This not only shapes how students view the LGBTQ+ community, it implies a forced heteronormativity where straight is the only acceptable option. This causes LGBTQ+ students to have a difficult time accepting themselves, even after they leave this environment. Christy mentioned that “even now, it’s hard to accept who I am,” many years after she left the oppressive environment of her school.<sup>9</sup> While the First Amendment prohibits public schools from imposing religion in the school, educators need to be aware that religion still plays a large role in the mindset of students and in how LGBTQ+ students see themselves, and take the opportunity to point out differences within and between religions and complicate what religion means in a given social context and how it relates to education.<sup>10</sup>

#### 3.2 Heteronormativity

*Have you felt the need to play the role of a sexuality other than your own in order to “fit in” at school?*

I felt the need to play into being straight because that’s what everyone else expected.

When I came out as bisexual, all my friends heard was “Oh no, he wants to have sex with me!” so I played the role of straight until college.

*Did the perception of your sexuality by others affect you, your education, or your educational experience?*

It was a game of checking yourself to make sure you’re not being too gay.

*Did general statements and opinions about sexuality affect you, your education, or your educational experience?*

The overall opinion was that sexuality is straight and monogamous.

In society, straight and cisgender is the assumed norm. Schools play into this norm with heterosexism — the assumption that everyone is straight and should be straight, playing into heteronormative ideals of society.<sup>11</sup> Something that goes hand in hand with heteronormativity is homophobia. It was mentioned earlier that religion cannot be blamed for all homophobia and that this blame should not be solely placed on religion.<sup>12</sup> From the research, it comes to light that the cause of homophobia ultimately has roots in the fear of the other. As a dominant society, we are inherently afraid of people who are different than us. So what does homophobia indicate? Does it merely indicate fear of the other? Is it a reflection of cultural attitudes about sex and sexuality? Or does it indicate anxiety about the fragility of the heterosexual norm?<sup>13</sup>

When people feel the need to assert their heterosexuality or to use expressions of homophobia to root their straight identity, it promotes heteronormativity and the idea that you have to be straight.<sup>14</sup> LGBTQ+ students feel the need to play the role of a sexuality that is not their own to “fit in.” They had to pretend to be straight because everyone expects that from them. The way Brian put it, he “felt the need to play into being straight because that’s what everyone else expected.”<sup>15</sup> This mentality is not unique to Brian; many students in the LGBTQ+ community make the conscious decision to play into being straight because in high school, straight is normal and everything else is wrong. End of discussion. This causes students like Natalie to “repress [their] sexuality for a long time”<sup>16</sup> because they feel like they cannot be themselves. The most damaging thing about this heterocentrism is the way schools are driven by a heterosexist ideology that denies and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior or identity.<sup>17</sup> Future educators must realize that every student is different and that just because a student does not fit into the preconceived box society makes for them does not make them irrelevant or unworthy or deserving of ridicule by others. It makes them uniquely human.

### 3.3 Coming Out Of The Closet

*Did the idea of “coming out of the closet” affect your perception of sexuality in general or of yourself?*

It’s something you go through being gay. People naturally assume everyone is straight.

It made me feel like there was something wrong with me.

It was very empowering but at its core it’s still an oppressive act because it makes heterosexuality the norm. The whole idea of coming out plays into the role of heteronormativity. It automatically makes you an “other.”

Something unique to the LGBTQ+ community is the process of “coming out of the closet”: announcing your sexuality or gender identity to people. Again, straight and cisgender is the assumed normal in our society. If you do not say anything, you are assumed to be straight. Just the idea of making a public statement about sexuality terrifies LGBTQ+ students. High school is a game of fitting in. If a student makes this statement about sexuality, if they identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, they are automatically considered the other - which isn’t a good thing for a high school student. When Greg came out of the closet, he said that “it made me feel like there was something wrong with me”<sup>18</sup> which ultimately led to him transferring schools and finishing his education elsewhere. It feeds into the concept of forced heteronormativity in that you are either straight, and hence normal, or you are not. In fact, many students resist the idea of coming out of the closet for this exact reason. In an interview with John, he spoke on his belief that “the whole idea of having to come out [of the closet] is playing into heteronormativity; the act of coming out automatically makes you an other... While coming out was a really positive experience overall and very empowering, it’s still at its core an oppressive act because you’re telling everyone that you’re not normal.”<sup>19</sup> In the age of increased cultural awareness, students realize that this forced heteronormativity is present and they do what they can to combat it in their own way.

However, even with forced heteronormativity, other sexualities and identities are becoming more accepted. While most students feel the need to play the part of a sexuality or identity that is not their own in high school, students are also feeling more confident in themselves - confident enough to come out at some point and make that public statement. And that is a sign of the times. Tom said “I was very afraid to come out, but once I did, I felt a lot better.”<sup>20</sup> While coming out is sometimes viewed as an oppressive act in itself, it still empowers students and lets them be authentic in their identity. Society is currently balancing on the edge of being uncomfortable with and being comfortable with other sexualities. As educators, we need to do what we can to continue helping my students feel comfortable, in the classroom and in themselves, and to break away from the forced heteronormativity of schools.

### 3.4 Stereotypes

*Did general statements and opinions about sexuality affect you, your education, or your educational experience?*  
I was looked at as a fetish. I didn't view myself as a person, I viewed myself as a piece of meat. My sexuality was changed into something for cis male consumption.

*What is one thing you wish people at your high school knew about you and/or your sexuality?*  
Bisexuals aren't 50% gay, 50% straight - I'm 100% bisexual.  
There's a tendency for people to associate being gay with someone's identity. We're only different in one aspect, my sexual orientation doesn't identify my whole life.

Stereotypes are everywhere and the LGBTQ+ community is no exception. Some common stereotypes include, but are not limited to the following:

"Bisexuality is just an excuse to have sex with anyone."<sup>21</sup>  
"People only claim to be trans so that they can creep in the women's bathroom."  
"If you're a gay and you have sex with another gay, you will get AIDS."<sup>22</sup>

These stereotypes are damaging not just to individuals in the LGBTQ+ community, but also to straight individuals and their perception of the community. These stereotypes play into heteronormativity in schools as well - students do not want to come out of the closet because they want to avoid having these assumptions made about them. One thing educators can do is actively combat these stereotypes. Initiate conversation about why the stereotype is false and why proclaiming it is harmful to everyone. Create places where students of all identities can voice their opinions and thoughts without fear of backlash from others. Create a healthy environment. While the stereotypes will not go away instantly, educators can do their part to make sure that these stereotypes do not spread out of control and that students leave our classrooms more educated than before, in terms of classroom knowledge as well as diversity knowledge.

### 3.5 Education

*Did the perception of your sexuality by others affect you, your education, or your educational experience?*  
It was never discussed in the realm of education. It affected the way I viewed people.

*What was the culture surrounding sexuality like at your high school? How did that culture impact the school environment and culture of the school as a whole?*  
No one asked any questions about any sexuality; it played a role in how the student body viewed LGBTQ+ students.  
I knew I was going to a school that wouldn't accept me.  
They asked people to leave the school because it didn't align with their moral standards.

*Can you describe a time when you felt comfortable or uncomfortable in your sexuality in the classroom or educational environment?*  
It was never discussed in an classroom setting.  
No one had a chance to be uncomfortable because it wasn't a thing, it was not even a subject.  
The topic was never discussed; it was always worked around and generalized.

So how can I, a future educator, apply this research to my classroom? It is beneficial to be aware of this information and what students are saying, but the important question comes when asked how to use my research to make a difference in my classroom for LGBTQ+ students. One thing to be aware of is that schools are structured by heterosexism. Straight is the assumed norm. Heterosexism and gender normativity permeate the educational system.<sup>23</sup> Teachers across the United States need to make sure they do not become neutral in our advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community. Desmond Tutu said it best, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

If teachers do not speak up and advocate for the students who feel like they do not have a voice, if they remain silent and do not talk about sexuality, students internalize that and think being gay is shameful and wrong.<sup>24</sup> Schools like the one that Julia went to, a school where "it was very, I think, ignorant of any other option... there really was no people who were openly gay"<sup>25</sup>, only exacerbate the problem and creates a climate of repression and harassment within

the school. This only feeds into the fears of LGBTQ+ students that cause them to feel unwelcome and unwanted in their school.

LGBTQ+ students are often in class, silently worrying and wondering if people are uncomfortable working with them, if people will accept them for who they are, if they will be forced to leave the school once they come out of the closet. Even though homosexuality and queerness is becoming more accepted in education and the world we live in, teachers must continually work to teach tolerance, to teach truth, and to find ways to destabilize and deconstruct the heterosexist norms that essentialize many of our future students.<sup>26</sup> Educators must expand the horizons of our students' education as well as our own education. Discuss sexuality and diversity with an open mind. While entire schools cannot be changed in a day or even in a semester, we can change students and classrooms. And soon, classrooms and students will turn into schools.

#### 4. Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express his appreciation to the Education Department at Luther College for supporting this research. Additionally, he would like to extend his deepest gratitude to Dr. Jill Leet-Otley for her constant support and feedback throughout the entire research process.

#### 5. References

- 
- 1 Katherine Watson, "Queer Theory," *Group Analysis* 38, no. 1 (March 1, 2005), 67: , accessed February 20, 2017, doi:10.1177/0533316405049369.
  - 2 Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 3.
  - 3 U.S. Const. amend. I
  - 4 Emily, interview by Jacob Cole, December 21, 2016.
  - 5 William F. Pinar, ed., *Queer Theory in Education*, Studies in Curriculum Theory (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1998), 194.
  - 6 Cris Mayo, *LGBTQ Youth and Education: Policies and Practices*, Multicultural Education Series (New York: Teachers College Press, 2014), 67.
  - 7 Mayo, *LGBTQ Youth and Education*, 62, 74, 80.
  - 8 Maddie, interview by Jacob Cole, December 17, 2016.
  - 9 Christy, interview by Jacob Cole, January 22, 2017.
  - 10 Mayo, *LGBTQ Youth and Education*, 81.
  - 11 Ibid., 51.
  - 12 Ibid., 41.
  - 13 Ibid.
  - 14 Ibid., 42, 77.
  - 15 Brian, interview by Jacob Cole, January 16, 2017.
  - 16 Natalie, interview by Jacob Cole, January 2, 2017.
  - 17 Pinar, *Queer Theory in Education*, 198.
  - 18 Greg, interview by Jacob Cole, January 15, 2017.
  - 19 John, interview by Jacob Cole, January 30, 2017.
  - 20 Tom, interview by Jacob Cole, December 4, 2016.
  - 21 Natalie, interview by Jacob Cole, January 2, 2017.
  - 22 Will, interview by Jacob Cole, November 17, 2016.
  - 23 Pinar, *Queer Theory in Education*, 74.
  - 24 Mayo, *LGBTQ Youth and Education*, 61.
  - 25 Julia, interview by Jacob Cole, December 1, 2016.
  - 26 Pinar, *Queer Theory in Education*, 55.