LGBTQ+ Youth and Sense of Belonging in a School Community

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Abstract

A psychological sense of belonging to a school community is an important factor in the academic success and wellbeing of youth. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, queer, and other sexuality and gender non-conforming (LGBTQ+) youth face significant barriers to belonging in school communities. Using Goodenow’s (1993) definition of belonging as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others—especially teachers and other adults within the school social environment” (pp. 60-61), this phenomenological study explored the sense of belonging of LGBTQ+ high school students in school communities in the Comox Valley. Qualitative data collection was done through student-created art, creative writing pieces and/or semi-structured interviews. Three participants created visual art pieces and completed interviews, one participant did a creative writing piece, and two participants took part in interviews only. Thematic data analysis of the transcribed interviews and written piece revealed five main themes: acceptance, identity as important words in the definition of belonging, and Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs), friends, and supportive adults as important factors in belonging. This study suggests that LGBTQ+ students feel they most belong when they attend a GSA, when they have supportive adults and friends around, and when they can express their true identity without being judged. The study supports the need for continued support of comprehensive LGBTQ+ policies and practices in school communities.
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Chapter 1: Problem to be Investigated

Introduction

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, queer, and other sexual minority and gender non-conforming (LGBTQ+) youth make up a significant portion of the high school population in British Columbia. According to a 2014 BC provincial study, 15% of male and 23% of female BC high school students identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, or not exclusively heterosexual, and fewer than 1% of BC high school students identify as transgender and 5% identify as Two-Spirit (Smith et al., 2014).

Safety, violence exposure, homophobic bullying, and discrimination are major issues in schools for LGBTQ+ youth (Saewyc, Poon, Kovaleva, Tourand & Smith, 2016; Koswic, Greytak, Giga, Villenas & Danischewski, 2016). LGBTQ+ youth experience significantly more exclusion, physical assault and verbal assaults at school than their peers and thus are less likely to feel safe at school (Saewyc et al., 2007). In a study by Koswic et al. (2016), “57.6% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and 43.3% because of their gender expression” in the United States (p. xvi). These rates are even higher in some studies; For example, 64% of LGBTQ+ students reported that they feel unsafe at school in the 2011 Egale National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia in Canadian Schools (Taylor & Peter, 2011). Higher rates of suicide and mental health issues among LGBTQ+ youth have been linked to experiencing homophobia (McCallum & McLaren, 2010).

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1 For the purpose of this study, the acronym LGBTQ+ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, queer or questioning and intersex peoples. It should also be understood to include any non-traditional sexual or gender orientations and is meant to be inclusive of anyone who does not identify as straight or cisgender.
Marginalization and the risks posed for this particular group, makes LGBTQ+ youth an important group for study.

The negative effects of homophobia and bias-directed violence and bullying are not only experienced by LGBTQ+ youth, but also by others in the school community. Students and staff experience homophobic bullying regardless of actual sexuality or gender identity (Saewyc, Konishi, Rose & Homma, 2014). LGBTQ+ policies that are put into place can also benefit the entire community. Gay-Straight, or Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) and anti-homophobia policies in schools can lead to fewer suicide attempts, better motivation at school, less depression and less underage drinking amongst all students (Smith et al., 2014; Fetner & Elafros, 2015) and less victimization based on sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation (Kosciw et al., 2016). There are overreaching positive effects of LGBTQ+ focused policies in schools.

Although LGBTQ+ students are marginalized in secondary schools and face regular discrimination and violence (Saewyc et al., 2016; Koswic et al., 2016), many LGBTQ+ students are open about their sexuality or gender non-conformity in the high schools in the Comox Valley. Many of these youth attend their own high school’s GSA club or the school district GSA meetings. As the sponsor of a high school GSA and as the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) district policy school leader, the researcher met these youth and talked about their experiences with them. The conversations in the GSA and the observation of the creative expression of many of the LGBTQ+ students were the inspiration for this research.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to allow LGBTQ+ youth in the Comox Valley to express, through art, writing and interviews, their sense of belonging in a school community. The over-arching goal was to see if school belonging and community have a role in LGBTQ+ youth’s identity and positive experiences at school and why there are a number of youth in the Comox Valley who are open about being LGBTQ+. The second goal was to allow LGBTQ+ youth to creatively define their own sense of belonging, thereby adding student voice to the data on LGBTQ+ youth and school connectedness. The study focused on positive aspects of LGBTQ+ connections to school to see which practices and policies allow LGBTQ+ youth to feel that they belong. The intent was to demonstrate that safe and supportive school environments for LGBTQ+ students can greatly influence these students’ sense of value in the school community and the overall health of a school (Banks, 2002). By providing information for our district and high schools about how to include one of the most marginalized groups in the school community the researcher wanted to inspire continued district and school support for LGBTQ+ students.

Justification of the Study

A sense of belonging, or “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others-especially teachers and other adults within the school social environment” (Goodenow, 1993, pp. 60-61), can greatly impact students’ psychological well being (McCallum & McLaren, 2010) and promote school success and prevent school dropouts (Blum & Libbey, 2004). “Feeling safe at school and school connectedness or attachment are important protective factors for all youth”
(Saewyc et al., 2014, p. 90). Aronson and Steele (2005) agree that feelings of belonging, trust in people, and the belief that teachers value students’ intellectual competence, impact students’ motivation and connection to learning the most. LGBTQ+ youth, however, have been found to be more likely than their sexuality and gender-conforming peers to experience lower levels of school connectedness (Kosciw et al., 2016; Robinson & Espelage, 2012; Diaz et al., 2010). This study explored the ways in which school belonging, or connectedness, is experienced by LGBTQ+ youth, so that levels of connectedness could be improved.

The specific needs and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ students have been identified provincially. In 2008 the British Columbia Ministry of Education published a document called “Diversity in BC Schools: A Framework”. This document recognized the importance of honouring diversity, creating safe and welcoming learning environments, having equitable access to quality education for all learners, and promoting understanding and respect of others. Education Minister Mike Bernier then announced in September of 2016 “that explicit references to sexual orientation and gender identity are being added to the policies that school districts and independent schools are required to have in place” (BC Ministry of Education, 2016, p.1). The recognition of diversity and sexual orientation and gender identity is important to overall policies and recognition of LGBTQ+ youth in the school setting.

LGBTQ+ policies and practices are also supported by the Safe, Caring and Orderly Schools policy of the British Columbia Ministry of Education (2008b). This policy states that BC schools are trying to “develop positive, welcoming school cultures … A key part of this work includes fostering school connectedness and developing
protocols for preventing and intervening in instances of bullying, and other harmful behaviours” such as homophobia (BC Ministry of Education, 2008b, p. 25). BC Ministry policies and mandates support the need to focus on effective inclusion policies for LGBTQ+ youth and to look at how to support school connectedness and belonging.

The new BC curriculum focuses on the role of culture in an inclusive education that takes into consideration the whole child to create a sense of belonging. One of the core competencies in the new curriculum is ‘positive personal and cultural identity.’ This is defined as “the awareness, understanding, and appreciation of all the facets that contribute to a healthy sense of oneself” (BC Ministry of Education, 2015). The research into how LGBTQ+ students feel they belong in a school community is relevant to this core competency. The research is also very relevant to School District #71’s vision of “a learning community that embraces diversity, honours relationship and prepares all learners for a changing world” (Comox Valley School District, 2015).

In 2011, the Comox Valley School board adopted one of British Columbia’s first Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) policies. The board recognized that LGBTQ+ students and community members face challenges and discriminatory behaviour (Comox Valley School District, 2011). The goal of the policy “is to build a welcoming, inclusive, and affirming school community for LGBTQ individuals and families” by promoting “a safe environment, free from harassment and discrimination, and pro-active strategies and guidelines to ensure that [LGBTQ+] students, employees and families are welcomed, included, and affirmed in all aspects of education and school life and treated with respect and dignity” (Comox Valley School District, 2011, p. 3). Part of this study was looking at what practices are in place after the SOGI policy was
adopted, to see if they are effective in helping LGBTQ+ youth feel like they belong and are included.

Despite provincial and local LGBTQ+-supportive policy implementation, there remains an inadequacy of Canadian school responses to inequity. There is still marginalization of students based on sexuality and gender (Rayside, 2014). Students of these underprivileged groups have barriers to social and academic achievement, which is shown in patterns of inequality (Ryan, 2006). British Columbia’s schools are not yet fostering the BC Ministry’s policy of success and fair and equitable treatment for all students, and this study looked at ways that this policy could be met for LGBTQ+ youth.

Much of the research on LGBTQ+ youth has focused on the negative aspects of school environments, such as discrimination and marginalization (Taylor & Peter, 2011). Few studies have looked at positive school experiences for LGBTQ+ youth (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz & Russell, 2011). The problem with a focus on negative experiences such as harassment and bullying is that it then “treat[s] it as a problem derived from individuals and directed only at sexual minority students” (Rayside, 2014, p. 212). Such policies are also frequently reactive rather than proactive (Rayside, 2014). While much of the research has recognized that there is a problem for LGBTQ+ youth in schools, there is not a lot looking at what can be done and what is working. It has been suggested that more studies such as this one be done on the “state of LGBTQ student wellbeing in districts with … LGBTQ-specific interventions” that improve resiliency and wellbeing such as the SOGI policy (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 44).

While there has been an increased focus on LGBTQ+ youth in school policy and research, there is also not a lot of youth voice in the studies that have been done; For
example, Fetner and Elafros’ study (2015) targeted young adults because they would not have to go through schools and bias the study with parental permission. The current study aimed to add authentic student voice to the research and data.

**Research Question and Hypothesis**

Knowing that school connectedness or belonging is an important factor of school success (Blum & Libbey, 2004), that LGBTQ+ students face barriers to belonging, and that many LGBTQ+ students are comfortable being open about their sexuality and gender in the Comox Valley, the following research questions were developed:

1. How do LGBTQ+ youth define and express a sense of belonging in a school community?

2. Where and when do LGBTQ+ youth in the Comox Valley feel that they belong in a school community?

Students who were part of the GSA at the researcher’s school were also part of the Art Club and took part in other artistic activities; therefore, it was thought that LGBTQ+ youth would want to be involved with the artistic expression part of the study because it reflected their interests and skills. It was hypothesized that participants would talk about the important role of their peers and adults, such as teachers and administrators, in the community in terms of their belonging (McLaren, Schurmann & Jenkins, 2015; Blum & Libbey, 2004; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). It was predicted that those students who were not involved in activities or extracurricular activities, did not have a safe space, or had fewer connections to adults would feel the least sense of belonging. It was also hypothesized that participants would mention the importance of GSA’s as part of their community (McLaren et al., 2015). This study also created an
opening for negating these predictions/hypothesis and discovering new information to support the
LGBTQ+ community.

**Definition of Terms**

*LGBTQ*+ is “an umbrella term for the sexual and gender minority identities, including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Two Spirit and Queer. Other identities such as intersex and asexual are often read into the acronym” (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 10). The current study also uses the terms *sexuality and gender nonconforming* or *sexual minority* to refer to people whose identity or expression does not fit societal norms of heterosexual and cisgender. The addition of the “+” to the historical LGBTQ acronym is meant to be inclusive and represent terms that are continually evolving and may be place specific. For definitions of the specific terms, see UC Berkley’s Division of Equity and Inclusion (2013) “Definition of Terms.”

With a focus on LGBTQ+ youth, there must also be recognition of the traditional power structure that revolves around dominant heteronormative ideas in education. *Heteronormative* is the “implicit moral system or value framework that surrounds the practice of heterosexuality”, which includes gender conventions (Oswald Blume & Marks, 2005, p. 144).

Heteronormative structures set up a system of privilege that leads to marginalization. *Marginalized* means anyone who finds themselves outside of the dominant group members in a community. Marginalized students have social inequities, and may face barriers in an educational setting due to their culture. There are frequently social and achievement gaps between dominant heterosexual students and marginalized students such as LGBTQ+ youth.
In 1993, Goodenow developed the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM), which extended work by Finn (1989) on belonging, and Wehlage (1989) on school membership. The study measured students’ sense of belonging, or membership, to a school community and predicted that it would impact their motivation for learning. Belonging, is defined by Goodenow (1993) as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others—especially teachers and other adults within the school social environment” (p. 60-61). This is the definition that is used in the current study and it informed the interview questions and the art prompt. Other terms that are used in the current study are school connectedness or attachment. School connectedness is “the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals” (Blum & Libbey, 2004, p. 231). Belonging means that a student feels they are valued and liked (Goodenow & Grady, 1993) and have a place in a school community. The participants in the study were asked to add or change this definition of belonging if they wanted to.

School community is understood in the study to mean the members who make up a school who share certain expectations, norms and values. A sense of belonging to this school community is important so that students feel valued and are positive about being at school to learn (Mullis & Fincher, 1996). A school community is also “an assemblage of the people intimately attached to a school” who are responsible for each other and have a common purpose (Redding, 1991, p. 7).

Every high school in the Comox Valley has a Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA), or a Gay-Straight Alliance. A GSA is “a student club set up to provide a safe space for LGBTQ students and their allies to meet, normally with one or two staff
facilitators…They are sometimes known by other names such as Rainbow Club or Diversity Club. It is becoming more common to refer to a Gay-Straight Alliance as a Gender and Sexuality Alliance to ensure that gender non-conforming and trans individuals are explicitly included within the mandate of GSAs” (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 10). The GSAs at the high schools in the Comox Valley vary their focus depending on the specific needs and interests of the school group, and the number of activist students. Sometimes these groups are safe socializing places, while others have brought in speakers, films, or held workshops with students or teachers. The Comox Valley also has a district-wide GSA meeting once a month where all of the high school GSAs meet together. The GSAs are the most visible and active school supports in place for LGBTQ+ students.

The formation of the GSAs is supported by the district Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) policy. “Sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) is a term used by the BC Human Rights Code to describe an area of prohibited discrimination. It is an inclusive term that encompasses all individuals regardless of where they identify on the sexual orientation or gender identity spectrums, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, two-spirit, heterosexual, and cisgender” (SOGI Education). The SOGI policy in the Comox Valley provides guidelines for administrators and teachers on how to protect everyone from discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. It also suggests that the community welcomes and provides safe places for LGBTQ+ youth and adults.
Brief Overview of Study

This study was a phenomenological approach to explore the sense of belonging of LGBTQ+ youth in School District #71 in the Comox Valley. Participants were recruited through posters in schools and presentations by the researcher to the district and school-based GSAs. Assent and parental consent forms were then given or sent to the interested participants.

Once the assent and consent forms were signed, the researcher sent out a prompt to the participants who wanted to do the visual or written component. The participants had gathered drawings or creative writing pieces from LGBTQ+ high school students. The art project allowed the participants to visually or creatively express their feelings of belonging at school. The art pieces were photographed or kept as digital files.

The researcher also scheduled individual interviews with the participants of the artistic expression part of the study and participants who chose only to contribute orally to the study. The semi-structured interviews consisted of open-ended questions based on Goodenow’s (1993) Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale survey questions (see Appendix B). The interviews allowed the participants to explain the meaning behind their art and describe their experiences of belonging in school. Participants were able to add to their own definition of belonging. The responses to the interview questions were audio recorded and then transcribed. Using NVIVO software and Mills’s (2014) steps for coding, the resulting transcripts were coded for themes that related to LGBTQ+ students’ sense of belonging at school.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

There has been an increasing focus on LGBTQ+ issues in research and how schools remain unsafe places for LGBTQ+ youth (Saewyc et al., 2016; Koswic et al. 2016; Mayberry, Chenneville, & Currie, 2011; Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010; Koswic, Greytak & Diaz, 2009; Saewyc et al., 2007). Much of the research has looked at LGBTQ+ youth as an at-risk population and suggested that school reform should include safe spaces and protective policies for these students (Mayberry et al., 2011). It was difficult to find studies on LGBTQ+ youth that explain positive proactive policies and procedures, specifically in BC event though BC is one of the provinces in Canada that is the “most likely to have LGBTQ provisions” (Taylor et al. 2016, p.7). It was also difficult to find studies that had student voice to explain positive membership to the overall school community and not just LGBTQ+ communities, such as GSAs. When searching keywords such as “belonging” and “connectedness” for LGBTQ+ youth, the majority of studies focused on GSAs and impact on health factors for these students. While most of the research has been done on victimization and non-inclusion of LGBTQ+ youth, recently there has been more focus on positive outcomes such as wellbeing and resilience for LGBTQ+ youth (Kosciw, Palmer & Kull, 2015).

This literature review first explored why LGBTQ+ youth are an at-risk group to understand why this justification is commonly used to focus on the group of students. Many references are made to Saewyc’s research done in British Columbia with LGBTQ+ youth. Then the review looks at the importance of belonging to a school community and the role that a comprehensive strategy involving GSAs, adults, peers and curriculum supports can have on a sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ youth. Finally, the importance
of allowing for culturally relevant study techniques is discussed. There was not a lot of
literature about LGBTQ+ youth and art expression.

**LGBTQ+ youth as an at-risk group**

There are numerous studies that show how LGBTQ+ students are marginalized
and experience more challenges at school than their cisgender or heterosexual peers
(Saewyc et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2016; Mayberry et al., 2011; Diaz et al., 2010;
Kosciw et al., 2009; Saewyc et al., 2007). LGBTQ+ youth experience more victimization
and harassment, which can result in negative academic achievement, lack of school
connectedness, and negative psychological outcomes (Saewyc et al., 2015; Kosciw et al.,
2015; Saewyc, Konishi, Rose & Homma, 2014; Kosciw et al., 2009). In the study by
Kosciw et al. (2016), nine in ten LGBTQ+ students had been harassed at school and one
in six had been physically assaulted mostly due to their sexuality of gender expression.
Many of these students do not report this harassment or assault because of concerns of
how the staff will react or not intervene (Kosciw et al., 2016). Transgender, genderqueer,
and other non-cisgender students face the most hostile school climates, even more than
cisgender LGBQ students (Kosciw et al., 2016). Having to face a hostile school
environment discourages these students from taking part in school activities, which can
negatively impact their sense of belonging (Kosciw et al., 2016).

Negative school experiences have been linked to mental health issues, suicidal
thought and attempts, substance abuse and other risky behaviours, less school
connectedness, and lack of academic motivation and achievement among LGBTQ+ youth
(Kosciw et al., 2016; Saewyc et al., 2016). However, “in spite of a significant increase in
research about the mental health issues in sexual minority youth over the past couple of
decades, there is little research about various protective factors that may mitigate the risks facing lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) and “mostly heterosexual” youth” (Saewyc et al., 2014, p. 90). The current study recognized that LGBTQ+ youth are a marginalized group that needs more support at schools in order for them to reach their full potential, and that more positive resilience factors should be looked at in the research.

**Impacts on the larger school community**

LGBTQ+ students “are not alone in being the targets of anti-gay homophobia and bullying in the school context” (Saewyc et al. 2014, p. 91). Homophobic bullying and victimization can impact other members of the community and overall school climate. Because heterosexual students make up the majority of students in a school, they are likely to be impacted by homophobic harassment (Saewyc et al., 2014).

Similarly, supportive school policies have been found to reduce the negative effects of victimization for all students in a school setting (Saewyc et al., 2014). For example, when GSAs and anti-homophobia policies were in place at schools for three or more years, there were lower suicidal thoughts for exclusively heterosexual girls and boys and lower rates of suicide attempts among heterosexual boys in addition to the benefits felt by LGBTQ+ youth (Saewyc et al., 2014). In the study by Konishi, Saewyc, Homma & Poon (2016), it was found that “interventions that improve school safety and climate for sexual minority youth may reduce harassment and its effects [such as substance abuse] for heterosexual students too” (p.6). LGBTQ+ specific policies and practices can benefit the entire school climate and sense of community and belonging for all students.
Belonging/connectedness

The psychological importance of social connection, or membership, to a group has been a long history of study. In 1954 Maslow developed a theory of motivation and psychological health. In his theory, a person is motivated in their actions to meet a hierarchy of needs: the physiological needs, the safety needs, the belongingness and love needs, the esteem needs and the need for self-actualization (Maslow, 1954). Maslow’s theory can be used to look at a student’s motivation within a school community. For many at-risk students the basic need of safety and the psychological need of belongingness are not met in a school community, which may impact their motivation for learning. This includes LGBTQ+ students who do not feel safe at school; with lower levels of support they “are prone to experiences of isolation, alienation, stress, and stigmatization” (Saewyc et al. 2014, p. 91). Even when a safe place such as a GSA is provided, LGBTQ+ youth may feel socially isolated and not connected to the larger school community, which can impact their motivation for learning.

Social context and school membership is important for school motivation and educational success. School membership includes being supported by peers and adults within the community, being involved in activities, and having a sense of value to the community (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Goodenow, 1993; Wehlage, 1989). Wehlage’s (1989) study showed that effective schools create supportive environments that encourage membership to the school community and educational engagement for at-risk students. Finn (1989) also found that successful school completion is linked to participation in school activities and a sense of belonging to the school community. Goodenow (1993) expanded on these studies and developed an 18-point student survey called the
Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM). This study looked at students’ perceptions on how they are supported, respected, and belong to a school community. Goodenow’s (1993) study also suggested that school connectedness, or belonging to the social group, is linked to levels of engagement, academic effort and school success. Goodenow’s (1993) questionnaire on school membership (see Appendix A) provided wording for the interview questions on belonging for the current study.

A sense of belonging to a school community has been shown to be an important motivational and protective factor for at-risk youth, such as LGBTQ+ students. Studies have found that victimization in school and the resulting health issues are directly related to lower school connectedness for LGBTQ+ youth (Saewyc et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2016; Diaz et al. 2010). Negative health behaviours and eventual withdrawal from school “may be associated with students’ feelings of not belonging to school” (Voelkl, 1996, p. 761).

A sense of school connectedness is linked to better psychological, health, and academic outcomes (Diaz et al., 2010). Students who feel they are valued members of a community exhibit “lower levels of emotional distress, violence, suicide attempts, and drug use” (Blum & Libbey, 2004, p. 231). When LGBTQ+ students are victimized they have a lower sense of belonging, but with increased institutional support they do well and feel more connected (Saewyc et al. 2016; Diaz et al., 2010). LGBTQ+ students who are connected to the school community have better grades, better psychological health and more positive relationships with peers (Kosciw et al., 2016; McLaren et al., 2015). To try and improve LGBTQ+ youth’s sense of belonging, GSAs have been formed as safe places that offer a sense of community and decrease harassment (Mayberry et al., 2011).
GSAs

One of the critical ways that schools try to create safe places and community for LGBTQ+ youth is through Gender-Sexuality Alliances or GSAs (Kosciw et al., 2016; Mayberry et al., 2011; Fetner & Elafros, 2015). GSAs allow “members to develop a supportive community, and provide them with a sense of responsibility toward that community” (Mayberry et al., 2011, p. 325). Numerous studies show that GSAs are positive for LGBTQ+ youth health and school wellbeing (see for example Kosciw et al., 2016; Fetner & Elafros, 2015; Toomey et al., 2011; Saewyc et al., 2014; Mayberry et al., 2011; Konishi et al., 2013; Greytak, Kosciw & Boesen, 2013; Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig & Russell, 2013). Schools with GSAs have improved student outcomes, such as significantly lower odds of discrimination, suicidal thoughts and attempts for LGBTQ+ youth (Saewyc et al., 2014), better academic outcomes (Kosciw et al., 2016; Lee, 2002), better mental health and less anti-gay bullying (Saewyc et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2016), increased school connection or sense of belonging (Kosciw et al., 2016; Lee, 2002), and less substance abuse among all students (Saewyc et al., 2016; Konishi et al., 2013). In the study by Taylor et al. (2016) superintendents reported that GSAs led to greater “peer support…, increased inclusion, less homonegative language, increased staff support…, less harassment, increased school attachment…, improved mental health/ reduced suicidal behaviour, improved self-esteem, improved performance/attendance, and less high-risk behaviour among LGBTQ youth” (p. 29). The positive effects of a GSA can be felt by LGBTQ+ students even if they are not members of the GSA (Walls, Kane & Wisneski, 2010).
GA’s can impact the entire student population in a positive way. “Results from studies in Canada show GSAs are also linked to better health for straight youth too, not just LGB youth” and “LGBTQ-inclusive policies contribute to better health among both sexual minority and heterosexual students” (Saewyc et al., 2016, p. 6).

While “higher levels of sense of belonging to a [LGBTQ+] youth group were associated with higher levels of sense of belonging to the general community” (McLaren et al., 2015, p. 1690), having a GSA as the only LGBTQ+ support may not significantly improve school climate for LGBTQ+ students. When the school adults do not interfere with bullying or a heteronormative culture, a sense of apathy is produced among GSA members because they do not feel supported outside of the GSA (Mayberry et al., 2011, p. 332). GSAs alone are unlikely to change school climate or school connectedness (Walls et al., 2010; Diaz et al., 2010; Goodenow, Szalacha & Westheimer, 2006).

Saewyc et al. (2014) found that it is not a consistent finding that “sexual minority youth who attend schools with Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) report fewer negative and more positive school experiences compared to those who attend schools without GSAs” (p. 92). GSAs are important positive supports for LGBTQ+ youth, but other policies and practices must be in place to support them.

**Comprehensive policies and practices**

A comprehensive and varied approach is needed to create a sense of school belonging for LGBTQ+ youth. Diaz et al. (2010) found that GSA attendance and “having supportive school staff and comprehensive bullying/harassment policies were directly related to greater school connectedness for [LGBTQ+] students.” (p.16). In the study by Kosciw et al. (2016) it was found that while “a majority (83.6%) of students had
an anti-bullying policy at their school, only 10.2% of students reported that their school had a comprehensive policy (i.e., that specifically enumerate both sexual orientation and gender identity/expression)” (p. xxi). LGBTQ-inclusive education varies across the provinces in Canada, “with nearly two-thirds of BC and 56% of Atlantic superintendents reporting having a specific LGBTQ-inclusive policy, but only 17% of participants from … Alberta and 19% from Québec indicating having one” (Taylor et al. 2016, p.19).

The study by Taylor et al. (2016) suggests that there are four main supportive policies that must be in place for LGBTQ+ youth’s sense of wellbeing and school belonging: “policy addressing homophobic harassment and LGBTQ inclusion; [GSAs]; professional development for educators on the topic of LGBTQ education; and LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum to support inclusive teaching practices” (p.11). However, only “a third of districts [involved in the study]…reported none of the four key policy components, with 25% reporting one of the four; 19% reporting two; 20% three; and 7% reporting all four components”(Taylor et al. 2016, p. 22).

The Comox Valley School District has a LGBTQ+ student support policy that includes a SOGI policy and established GSAs at all of the high schools which lines up with the idea that “multi-pronged approaches to inclusive education [are] best practices” (Taylor et al. 2016, p. 44).

**Role of teachers and adults**

Having a supportive adult within the school community is one of the most important protective factors and indicators of success for LGBTQ+ youth in school (Taylor et al. 2016; Johnson & Gastic, 2015; Diaz et al., 2010; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Supportive adults in the school environment include teachers, counsellors, nurses,
administration and others. In fact, LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to have adult mentors and support in schools than at home or within their family (Johnson & Gastic, 2015). In the 2015 National School Climate Survey, it was found that LGBTQ+ youth who have eleven or more supportive staff at their school are less likely to feel unsafe, are less likely to miss school, have better school experiences and academic success, are more likely to attend post-secondary, and are more likely to feel connected to their school community (Kosciw et al., 2016). In the study by Fetner and Elafros (2015), LGBTQ+ youth talked about the importance of supportive, encouraging teachers and administrators as being life changing. This was especially true in schools with GSAs.

Interestingly, it has been found that there is a reciprocal relationship between acceptance by adults and belonging: “Just as students who feel themselves to be full and valued members of the school are more motivated and engaged, so, too, motivated and engaged students are accorded more acceptance and respect from others in the school, especially school adults” (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 69).

In the study by Kosciw et al. (2016), it was found that in the last few years teachers intervene less to biased language, and have increased the use of biased language against LGBTQ+ students themselves. This means that there is still work to be done with how adults support LGBTQ+ students in the school setting.

**LGBTQ+ curriculum**

One of the important ways that staff shows support of LGBTQ+ students is through inclusive curriculum. LGBTQ+ students who “received an LGBT-inclusive education performed better in school and exhibited higher academic aspirations (Kosciw et al., 2016, p.68). They also found that an inclusive curriculum lead to increased school
engagement, improved peer acceptance and intervention, and an improved sense of belonging (Kosciw et al., 2016). However, the majority of students are not exposed to LGBTQ+ issues in their classrooms (Kosciw et al., 2016). To understand how to integrate LGBTQ+ issues into curriculum requires staff training and professional development, which many educators find is lacking (Taylor et al. 2016).

**Peers**

Another important factor for school belonging and academic motivation is having peer connectedness or friendship (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Low levels of peer connectedness have been linked to higher depressive symptoms, which suggests that peer connectedness may be one of the most important protective factors for LGBTQ+ youth in schools (McLaren et al., 2015). “Friends can be excellent sources of support for LGBTQ students” (Fetner & Elafros, 2015, p. 574) which allows LGBTQ+ students to navigate school and challenging situations (Johnson & Gastic, 2015).

**Study format**

As suggested by Ye and Wallace (2014), Goodenow’s (1993) original questionnaire on belonging uses negatively worded items that may influence the answers that were provided, but it still provides relevant data on school belonging. The researcher wanted to use the wording in this questionnaire, but was also aware that as a straight researcher, it was important to access LGBTQ+ youth with inclusivity and sensitivity. Many of the research methods that are traditionally used are heteronormative (Allen, 2006). While focus group have been suggested as bringing out more ideas around sexuality and gender as a shared experience (Allen, 2006), the researcher wanted to maintain as much confidentiality for the participants as possible and so decided to do
individual interviews. The researcher also did not specifically ask about sexuality or
gender identity in the interview, but allowed participants to disclose if they wanted to.
This allowed conversations to focus on belonging more than sexuality or gender.

When searching for a connection between LGBTQ+ youth and art, there were
only references to art therapy as a relevant method for patients (for example see Pelton-
Sweet & Sherry, 2008). The researcher knew that many of the LGBTQ+ youth who were
part of the GSA at school enjoyed expressing themselves through drawn art, cartooning,
and creative writing. Their creative expression was observed during GSA meetings, in
class, and in an art group. The researcher wanted to use a non-traditional method of
study that respected the expression of this group. By also offering to allow participants
the option to do the art only portion, the researcher was removed even more as an
outsider of the process.
Chapter 3: Procedures and Methods

Research Design

This phenomenological study was developed to explore the expression of belonging at a public school by gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, two-spirited, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ+) middle and high school students. As the teacher sponsor of a gay-straight alliance [GSA] and an art club, the researcher had observed that many of the GSA students expressed ideas through drawing and writing and wanted to honour this cultural expression and not use traditionally heteronormative study methods (Allen, 2006). The art and writing section of this study was inspired by the poetry, writing and art found in the Project Muse publication (Tilleczek & Ferguson, 2013). In this qualitative study, the researcher gathered drawings or creative writing pieces from self-identified LGBTQ+ middle and high school students in SD#71 in the Comox Valley. The art project allowed the participants to visually express their feelings of belonging at school and was guided by the statement: “Represent in artistic form, either writing or drawing, a time or place you have felt a sense of belonging at school.” Participants who chose to do the artistic expression were given one to two months to create their art piece or written expression; however, the researcher ended up having a deadline of the end of the year to gather more data. With consent, the researcher photographed or recorded the art and written pieces as visual data.

The researcher also scheduled individual interviews with the participants of the artistic expression part of the study and participants who chose only to contribute orally to the study. The semi-structured interviews consisted of open-ended questions to allow for the participants to explain the meaning behind their art or writing, and describe their
experiences of belonging in school. There was also questioning related to barriers to belonging. School belonging was defined by the researcher as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others—especially teachers and other adults within the school social environment” (Goodenow, 1993, pp. 60-61). Participants were allowed to contribute their own definition of belonging. The responses to the interview questions were audio recorded and then transcribed and coded for themes that related to LGBTQ+ students’ sense of belonging at school. The resulting thematic data and quotes were matched with the artistic expression pieces to show how LGBTQ+ students in the district express their sense of belonging at school and to see what places of belonging are present in the schools in the Comox Valley.

Sample

The student participants ranged in age from 13-18 years and were recruited from public middle and high schools in SD #71 in the Comox Valley. SD#71 developed one of the first Sexual Orientation and Gender Identification [SOGI] policies in the province and was one of only twenty-nine districts in BC with an anti-homophobia policy in 2014 (Christopher, 2014). The Comox Valley School District, in addition to elementary schools, has two middle schools, three high schools, and one alternative school and all of these middle and high schools run Gay-Straight Alliances. The majority of participants had attended one of the GSAs in the district. Participants were recruited through the high school and middle school GSA teacher sponsors, at the district GSA meeting through recruitment letters (Appendix B), and through recruitment posters (Appendix C). The researcher was able to present the recruitment script (Appendix D) at the monthly district GSA meetings held in October and November of 2016, and at the researcher’s school
GSA. Interested students were given parental consent forms (Appendix E) and informed assent forms (Appendix F).

There were six high school students who volunteered to be part of the study. Of these students, two identified as transgender, one identified as lesbian, one identified as queer, and two did not offer their gender or sexual preference data. These demographic results were gathered in the interviews. Three of the students volunteered to be included in the artistic expression and interview portions of the study. One student was willing to do an interview, but only was able to do the creative writing piece. The other two students participated in the interview portion of the study only. The researcher knew that “because they wish to avoid stigma and discrimination and are concerned about their privacy, some individuals are reluctant to disclose their membership in a sexual- or gender-minority group” (Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2011, p. 92), so it was important to allow participants to self identify as being from the LGBTQ+ community and participants were not required to disclose how they defined themselves as being part of the LGBTQ+ community. The students were kept anonymous by using pseudonyms of their choice, and by not identifying them by school or age.

**Instrument Used**

It was understood that “sexual- and gender-minority participants are more likely to trust researchers who evidence knowledge and sensitivity about their community and culture, characteristics commonly understood to be components of cultural competence” (IOM, 2011, p. 93). For this reason, the researcher wanted to allow for cultural expression through art and creative writing. It was hypothesized that at the high school level participants would be more excited and willing to express themselves creatively
than through structured surveys. Even though visual data is an emergent research method, the researcher was very aware of allowing for critical discourse and emancipatory expression through culturally appropriate ways. To allow for as much freedom of expression as possible, the only guiding element of the artistic expression component of the study was the prompt: *Represent in artistic form, either writing or drawing, a time or place you have felt a sense of belonging at school* (Appendix G). The participants were also given a time frame of one month to complete their drawing or writing so that there would be enough time to schedule mutually convenient interviews.

The researcher chose to do interviews with students because “as with research on other sensitive topics, challenges include nonparticipation and item nonresponse ...” (IOM, 2011, p. 92). With interviews, the researcher could ask for further details or ask why a question was not answered. The researcher chose semi-structured interviews (Appendix H) so that they were more like conversations, with the researcher moving back and forth between questions to get more information. The idea was that “study data would be collected from each interview and in a manner that respected the flow of each participant's thought process and mode of expression” (IOM, 2011, p. 121).

Many of the interview questions were adapted from the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Scale (Goodenow, 1993, p. 84) (see Appendix A). The questions were the same for both the artistic and the interview-only participants, but the artistic group was given time at the beginning to explain their artistic expression. They were asked: Can you explain your piece to the researcher? How does your artistic piece reflect your feelings of belonging at school? Why did you choose to do an artistic representation of belonging? The rest of the questions were based on ideas of the
importance of adult-student relationships (Brokenleg, 2010) and pedagogies of care
(Velasquez, West, Graham & Osguthorpe, 2013) to school belonging. The questions
were directed towards relationships with peers and adults at school, feeling a sense of
success and accomplishment, and barriers to belonging.

The questions that were prepared for both groups were:

1. How do you define belonging in a school community?
2. Do you feel you can be yourself at school? How? Where?
3. How do you feel a part of your school community?
4. Where do you feel you most belong in your school community? Why?
5. What spaces at school make you feel like you belong?
6. Without naming names, who are the adults that care about you at your school?
7. Without naming names, who are the peers that care about you at your school?
8. Do you feel that other people respect you at school? How?
9. What are the activities that you are involved in at school?
10. What are the events at school that make you feel like you belong?
11. Do you feel that you make a positive impact on your school community? How?
12. Do you have any suggestions for improving your sense of belonging in your
   school community?

**Procedures Followed**

The researcher used the first few months of school to establish contact with
former and new members of the GSA at the researcher’s school. A recruitment poster
(Appendix C) was created to recruit student participants from the middle and high
schools who self-identified as being from the LGBTQ+ community. The poster
(Appendix C) explicitly stated that parental consent would be needed and that students
would remain anonymous in the study. It also stated that students could participate in the
art portion and interview portion of the study, or just the interview portion. After getting
research permission from the superintendent and all of the school principals, the poster
was displayed in counselling offices at all of the schools and was given to all of the GSA
sponsors at the November district GSA meeting. The researcher also presented the study
to the whole group of teachers and students at the district meeting in November and January.

Throughout the school year, the researcher established contact with the participants and arranged times to distribute the parental permission forms (Appendix E) and participant informed consent forms (Appendix F). The original deadline for getting the permission and consent forms returned was the first week of November, but the researcher found that it took longer. As the permission forms were collected, the researcher contacted the participants of the artistic expression component of the study and gave them the prompts (Appendix G). The participants had until the end of the school year to submit their artwork for photography or directly to the researcher. The researcher wanted to give the participants time to create their art, and did not want to run sessions with specific materials or time limits that might constrain them. Once collected, the artwork, writing, and photo card of the artwork was stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home.

Interviews were scheduled throughout the school year. The researcher wanted to be sure that participants could remember the meaning behind their artistic piece, so most of the interviews were done as soon as the artwork was received. The researcher established email or personal contact with the participants and arranged for a mutually convenient time and place to meet the participants. The interviews were scheduled for half an hour time slots, and ranged in time from thirteen minutes to forty minutes. The questions that were asked guided some of the answers, but the researcher allowed the interviews to run more like conversations (Appendix H). The interviews were audio recorded. When the interviews were finished, the researcher transcribed and then read
over them and used NVivo software to code for thematic similarities. The researcher looked for themes or quotes that seemed to match the artistic expression pieces. These ideas and quotes were paired together with the art in the final presentation.

**Validity and Limitations**

To maximize the credibility of the research, the researcher completed audio recordings and collected the original artwork and compared the themes in both of these types of expression. Due to confidentiality, only the researcher coded and read over the transcripts. It may have helped reliability to have another GSA sponsor teacher help to go over the transcripts. All of the data was in the participants’ own words. It also helped with dependability and the researcher’s understanding of the visual work, to follow up with the interviews so that students could explain their expression in more detail.

One of the challenges of the study was getting enough participants because it was recruiting from such a small sample. Recognizing that the study would not be able to get a large enough sample group to accurately portray all subgroups within the LGBTQ+ community, this study can only be seen as an examination of certain individual students’ definitions of gender and sexuality and individual expressions of belonging. The study did not lead to generalizable data. Because of the detail in the art and interview answers, some of the ideas behind belonging could be used in schools to benefit other marginalized students.

Interested participants found the fact that they had to get parental permission daunting, so it limited the number of students who got involved. All of the interested middle school students declined to participate because they were not out to their family, or they were not comfortable talking about their gender or sexuality with their parents or
guardians. As had been seen in the research, the permission forms create a biased sample because it filtered out some of the LGBTQ+ students.

Another challenge that the researcher encountered was the bias in understanding belonging from an outsider’s point of view. Because the researcher identifies as a cisgender, straight female, there was the chance that the questions could be directed in a heteronormative direction. Even though the researcher has some understanding of the group having been the GSA sponsor, it was important to allow for as much of the data to be collected in the participants’ own words and for the interviews to be more conversational than structured. This was the strength of having the artwork to start the conversation and guide the direction of the interview. The artwork also allowed there to be a visual aspect of the project to show the various expressions of belonging. The researcher also kept notes of each interview to record thoughts and ideas and any bias that arose.

**Analysis Techniques**

As was hypothesized, the participants were excited to creatively share their expression about belonging. The first part of the analysis looked at what types of expression that the participants chose. All but one chose to do visual art as opposed to writing. It was observed that there were some common images in the art of people and the individual being part of the art. These were coded and recorded. The researcher also looked for common colours and stylistic details, but there were no similarities. One thing that was not predicted was that one of the participants created a written piece that did not specifically talk about belonging at school, but did talk about the coming out process.
The second part of the analysis looked at the interview transcripts. The researcher looked for common words and themes that came up around the artistic expression and the other interview questions. The transcripts were coded using NVivo software, and were read many times. As was hypothesized many of the common ideas centred on teacher-student relationships, peer relationships and participation in GSAs. The themes that appeared for the definition of belonging were around acceptance and identity. Many of the suggestions from the students on how to improve belonging, focused on educating others and providing social activities.

Once themes had been coded, the researcher then looked at how they matched together. The art and the written expression pieces were presented along with quotes and themes that emerged from the interviews. The researcher ranked the themes in terms of how many times they came up in the art and the interviews. What all of the data showed was that relationships with adults, respectful peers, and safe spaces helped LGBTQ+ students to feel a sense of belonging at school.
Chapter 4: Findings and Results

Description of the findings

Using Mills’ (2014) ideas for identifying themes, the researcher started with reading and rereading the interview transcripts and the written creative piece for common words and ideas. The themes that came out of the transcript were coded and placed into manageable blocks (Mills, 2014), or nodes, using NVivo software. The common ideas were highlighted and placed into sub-nodes. When the nodes were complete, they researcher looked for commonalities across the topics and worked out five major themes associated with LGBTQ+ youth and their sense of belonging: acceptance, identity as important words in the definition of belonging, and GSAs, friends, and supportive adults as important factors in belonging. The themes that emerged were linked to the line of questioning and the ideas that the researcher had on belonging before the interviews took place.

The researcher also found it helpful to run a word frequency summary in NVivo of the transcripts and the written creative expression piece. After taking out common spoken words or words used heavily by the interviewer only, some key words emerged in a Wordle of the top 100 most frequently used words (See Appendix F): Feeling, school, people, belong, friends, community, teachers and GSA. These words connected with the main themes that emerged of a sense of belonging being tied to acceptance, identity, GSAs, friends, and supportive adults.

Art

The participants who took part in the artistic portion of the study were excited to talk about their artwork. Everyone used a different method for creating the art: Benji
used the app PaintTool SAI, Sam used the app Infinity Painter, and Levi used paint and canvas. Spring did the written piece using Microsoft Word. As the participants explained their artistic process, it revealed a lot about their sense of belonging as well.

Benji said that the colours did not have any significance, but it was more about capturing the situation using a style they were comfortable with. Alternatively, Levi put a lot of thought into the significance of the colours, which was their favourite part of creating the art.

Levi: Well I kinda just, I put like rainbow paint. Well not rainbow paint, but like different colours of paint all over the board and just kind smudged it in with, like a sponge. And then put white over it so that it kinda blended together more to, kind like, one because I just like the aesthetic of it, and two because it kinda gives it that more fluid visual effect because sexuality and gender are fluid.

Sam also looked at the significance of the colour, which they said matched the personalities of their friends. Sam also thought about the composition of the piece:

Sam: I decided to put myself in the middle because I feel like I’m surrounded in a group of people that are really kind, and that are willing to open up arms, and give me more support when I need it. It’s kind of like filling buckets. So we fill each others’ buckets when we need to. Sometimes one might be overflowing a little bit, but we always come back and push more water into the other bucket.
Part of Sam’s process was sharing the art with their community of friends on Instagram. The researcher had not expected this to happen, but recognized that by sharing the art, it reinforced Sam’s sense of belonging in their friend group.

As was hypothesized, the participants enjoyed the process of creating art and were able to symbolically represent a sense of belonging in the school community. Because the researcher wanted the explanation of the art to come from their perspective, the data analysis was done on the transcripts of the interviews and not the art itself. The art provides a rich visual to support the participants’ sense of belonging that is explained in their interviews. It also supports the main themes that are presented in the summary of findings.
Acceptance

**Benji (2017)** “Belonging is being in a place where you don’t feel like an outsider. For me it feels like I’m being treated in the same way as everybody else.”

One of the first questions that was asked in the interviews was “How do you define belonging.” This was linked to the first research question: How do LGBTQ+ youth define and express a sense of belonging in a school community?
The researcher had provided the participants with Goodenow’s (1993) definition as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others—especially teachers and other adults within the school social environment” (pp. 60-61), and then asked for their own definitions in the interview process. Lee agreed with Goodenow’s definition and did not expand on it. The other participants expressed their ideas of belonging, and used many of the same terms as in Goodenow’s definition. Many of their definitions used the words acceptance, support, and respect. All of the participants also mentioned the role of others in belonging, but only Tess and Lee specifically talked about adults in their definition of belonging.

The participants’ definition of belonging is that they can be themselves because they are accepted for who they are and they fit into the school community without being “an outsider” as Benji called it. The biggest obstacle to feeling like they were accepted and belonged was being judged.

Benji: A lot of the time our community does a really good job of um, like making sure like us queer people know that we’re accepted, but sometimes that still makes us feel a bit ostracized like, a constant reminder that like, “Oh right in most places we aren’t accepted.” And um, that moment (in the art) just really, really stood out to me because it was just, it just made it seem like there was, it never was seen as an abnormal thing ever in history. There was no questions like: “Oh you’re gay? Oh you have girlfriend? Like, how long have you been together?” It was just, you know, just…life.
Levi did not feel accepted outside of the GSA and did not always feel accepted in the GSA.

Levi: A few years ago in the GSA I didn’t, like, I felt accepted by a few people but I was scared of some other people. Those were the people who were there last year. They were judgmental.

Karma: Do you have any suggestions for improving your sense of belonging in a school community?

Levi: Um, I would probably need to become more social for that. Um, I feel like if I were more social I would be accepted.

Sam believed belonging is tied into how an individual sees the world, but also in how that confidence brings respect and support from others. The words respect and support also follow Goodenow’s definition.

Sam: I find that being belonging is more how you feel about yourself. In a way, it doesn’t really have anything to do with other people, it’s more about how you feel about yourself, in a way that you feel that other people respect you, and that you feel the support from other people. It’s not like you have the need for support, it’s that you know you have it around you, if that makes sense?

Tess and Sam also mentioned acceptance and respect shown through the use of preferred pronouns or names.
Sam: Belonging in a school community is, again, being able to accept yourself for who you are, and being able to accept those around you and how they treat you. So if someone’s treating you really bad and not accepting you by the fact that your pronouns are he/him or, then oh well, who cares. They can go live their own life, that’s fine. You choose to look at those who actually make you feel like you are a person, and that you’re actually there standing on those molecules that create earth.

Tess: [Belonging is] really kind of not feeling judged wherever you go, not feeling like you’re getting disapproving looks, um, if you change your name to something that feels better, no one… no one kind of shoves that name aside and goes back to your birth name. Teachers will call you what you ask to be and use whatever your pronouns are and people respect who you are.

The participants talked about the challenges they face to being accepted at school. Many of them talked about bullying experiences in school, especially in the elementary years. For example, Benji talked about being bullied for being queer and hearing many homophobic slurs at school. Lee also talked about being kicked and shoved at elementary school for being LGBTQ+. Levi was also called homophobic names at school. These experiences support the research that shows that LGBTQ+ youth face more barriers to acceptance and belonging than other youth in school communities (for example see Saewyc et al., 2014). The data also supports implementing a
comprehensive strategy that involves policies against homophobic bullying and harassment.

In general, the participants’ definitions of belonging were very similar to Goodenow’s (1993). The participants used many LGBTQ-specific examples for how respect, and acceptance are shown, such as the correct use of pronouns and chosen names. The participants felt that they could be themselves when they experienced acceptance by a social group. Acceptance, or not being judged, emerged as an important factor in the participants’ identity.

Identity

*Levi (2016)* “It’s actually, I feel like, like they’re all smiley ghosts, so we’re all feeling comfortable and okay with ourselves there, and we can just be ourselves and be free.”
Tall, skinny, pastey white, short brown hair, black toque, he has Depression and anxiety. He avoids others because of his fear. His fear of others harming him. He has two friends which he holds dear. He wears a black hoodie and black jeans, he's grade 9, having an identity crisis, something is wrong with him. He doesn't know what. He wants to commit suicide... He figures out the issue, Gender Dysphoria it makes their day, however forgetting Canadian healthcare is free. The price reality hits hard furthering his suicidal thoughts he nearly commits... He doesn't. He comes back the next day knowing the consequences so he doesn't he waits a month before coming out to a group of people who treat him well. They all support her, she later comes out to her aunt. Her life gets better.

*Spring (2017)*

Scherrer (2008) points out that “identity is not only an introspective process, but is given meaning by the broader cultural understandings of that identity and connects one’s self with others” (p. 622). There are political and social consequences of being oneself while identifying as a disadvantaged group such as LGBTQ+ (Rust, 1992). There can be a conflict in identifying as LGBTQ+ because it can lead to feelings of belonging and solidarity with the rest of the members of the group, but it can also put one at risk of not belonging to the larger social group (Rust, 1992). As seen in the definitions of belonging, identity is an important factor for LGBTQ+ youth and their sense of belonging. What is not clear is why the LGBTQ+ youth participants are more open about their identity as LGBTQ+ to be more connected to the LGBTQ+ group, or if they are more accepted overall in the school community and so can be out as LGBTQ+.

For Levi being able to be seen in the community as an individual and identifying as queer was very important for their sense of belonging. The community in which Levi felt the most belonging was within the GSA and not necessarily the larger community.
Levi: Cuz I identify as trans, but I also identify as gender-fluid and I’m kind of going through more of a girlish phase now, but I’m also completely out as transgender. So I feel like if I present femininely in class that people won’t really understand, but in the GSA I know that they will.

Levi: Then I just wrote “Here and queer” [on my art] cuz that’s my favourite thing to say. All different colours, like, …everyone’s like different in their own ways and we are not invisible because a lot of the time, um, LGBT people, especially sexual people, are like bisexuals or pansexuals are not really seen within the community.

Lee did not associate being part of the LGBTQ+ group as a large part of their identity because they felt that it could inhibit their acceptance in the larger community.

Lee: I’ve never wanted it to be a main factor in my identity cuz that’s kind of, people just don’t see past the gay, you know. So…I don’t discuss it unless it’s brought up with me, usually. It’s not one of the most important things about me so I don’t feel the need to announce it.

Lee: People tend to respect LGBTQ people less the more flamboyant they are with it. Which sucks because for some people that’s a large factor of their identity, but that’s never been a huge issue for me. It’s more of a like don’t ask, don’t tell.
Benji talked about how their identity is more tied in with the overall school community and not necessarily with being LGBTQ+, although they are not afraid to be open with their LGBTQ+ identity.

Benji: For a lot of queer people like being queer is a large part of their life because you know they may be activists, but I wanted to represent that for me it’s just sort of living, and like “yeah this is my identity but, like I just have probably the same life as like the majority of these students here”…

Benji: I try to be very open with my identity. I’m not saying that people should be, I mean like if its not safe for them, they don’t feel like coming out then don’t do it, but I want to be sort of, someone that people can look at be like “oh if they’re doing that then it’s okay if I do it.”

When Tess is asked how they feel they can be themselves at school, they responded that it is being to act how they normally would. They did not want to be open about their LGBTQ+ identity because they felt that they were not respected as much by the school community when they were open about it in the past.

Karma: How do you feel, ah, you can be yourself at school?
Tess: Um, I can dress the way I want to, I can look the way I want to, and um, be myself. Just kind of act the way I normally would.

Karma-Do you feel that other people respect you at school?
Tess—Not necessarily, back when I was [another name] I didn’t get much, uh, respect. Even now I don’t.

In the creative writing piece, Spring talks about the consequences of living with the wrong identity.

Spring: He wears a black hoodie and black jeans, he's grade 9, having an identity crisis, something is wrong with him. He doesn't know what.

Identity, acceptance and belonging seem to be interconnected: when one is accepted they feel they belong, and when they feel they belong they can be themselves, and when they are themselves it affects where they feel they belong. For a few of the participants it was embracing their LGBTQ+ identity that made them feel they belong. For other participants, they felt more comfortable not highlighting their LGBTQ+ identity in order to belong. This supports the idea that identity is tied to the social environment. Sometimes belonging to the LGBTQ+ group is more important for these youth than belonging to the overall school community, which impacts their identity.

**GSAs**

The second research question was: where and when do LGBTQ+ youth in the Comox Valley feel that they belong in a school community? All of the participants, except for Benji, said that they feel that they belong in the GSA and within the LGBTQ-specific community. The GSA seemed to emerge as the primary school community for many of the participants and also emerged as the only school involvement for the
participants. The only exception to this was Benji, who was part of the Environment Club and the International Issues Club.

The GSA was described as a “safe” and “accepting” place where the participants felt that they belonged and could be themselves. Lee and Levi said that the place they feel they most belong is in the GSA.

Lee: [The GSA] is just a safe space, accepting people who’ve got, or who’ve had, similar experiences or issues, to a certain extent. People are willing to listen if you’ve got something to say, that you might not discuss with other people as much. And we all come from the same like LGBT background, so LGBT issues are more relevant than they would be with my straight friends.

Levi: [I feel I belong] especially in the GSA, um, more than anywhere else. Cuz I feel like I’m allowed to be excited about things there, and I’m allowed to be gender fluid…

Sam talked about how the district GSA meetings were also important:

Sam: [The district GSA meetings] are important because you get to socialize with people that you don’t see everyday of your life.

The only space, other than being with friends, that Tess mentioned feeling a sense of belonging was in the district GSA:
Tess: I’m involved in the QSA. Um, that’s it really.

Karma: Do you feel in that space that you feel you belong?

Tess: Uh, yep. I think everyone belongs in the QSA (GSA).

The participants’ main place of belonging was the GSA. This supports the research (for example Kosciw et al., 2016; Fetner & Elafros, 2015; Toomey et al., 2011, 2015; Saewyc et al., 2014; Mayberry et al., 2011) on the benefits of having a GSA for creating a sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ students. What was not clear was if this space helped these students feel that they belong outside of the actual GSA. The only participant who did not participate in the GSA, Benji, was involved with other groups and had a strong friend group outside of the GSA. This also supports the idea that being involved in clubs or groups at school is important to a sense of belonging.
Friends

Sam (2016) “I belong in my friends, with my friends, my friend group.”
As hypothesized, friends are mentioned as an important part of belonging to the school community. Because of the definition of belonging that was given that connects to adults, it was surprising to see that friends are mentioned more frequently than adults in the interviews. Friends are mentioned throughout every interview, except Lee’s, as one of the most important factors in a sense of belonging for the participants. This aligns with Blum, Libbey, Bishop, J. H. & Bishop, M.’s (2004) study that shows that “social networks also influence connectedness. The larger a student’s network of friends, the stronger his/her connection will be to school” (p. 298).

Three of the participants who created the art pieces mentioned being surrounded by friends. Sam’s art piece was focused specifically on friends and how they have had a huge impact on their identity and expression.

Sam: I created my piece because I have realized that I have a bunch more friends than I might think that I have. And my friends are kind of what pushed me to be who I am because I don’t think without those people in my life I could be able to continue being who I am or talking about what I talk about, and, just going to school on a casual basis.

Spring also includes the importance of friends and supportive people in their written piece.

Spring: He has two friends which he holds dear.
Spring: … he waits a month before coming out to a group of people who treat him well. They all support her, she later comes out to her aunt. Her life gets better.

Benji was the third participant to talk about friends impacting their art piece. Their friends are what makes them fit in “normally” with the rest of the school.

Benji: I just have probably the same life as like the majority of these students here, and I wanted to sort of show that in the way of, you know, what I normally do at lunch time: Just sit with my friends, drink my bottle or tea.

Both Sam and Tess talked about feeling like they are in a place of belonging with they are hanging out with their friends.

Sam: We laugh together. We share things, we talk to each other after school, we hang out the odd time. And even if we’re not close, close friends, I still know they care.

Tess: Well, I’m usually hanging out with friends and one of my longtime friends hang out there. We’ve been friends for almost seven years, so we just kind of act like ourselves.

Benji talked about how their friends play the most important role in the sense of belonging in the overall school community.
Benji: This school is like the only place I’ve felt like I’ve belonged, and only in certain friend groups. I have friends who if they saw me in the hallway they’d come up and hug me and I’d never had that before. They treated me like I was like, the way that they interact with their other friends and that, that felt really, really good.

The interviews show that the size of a student’s friend group affects a student’s sense of belonging. This seems to be especially important for LGBTQ+ youth who are looking for acceptance in a challenging environment. For participants such as Tess, friends are sometimes the only people that create a sense of belonging. On the other hand, Lee felt that they didn’t actually share that many interests with their friends. This could be linked to Lee’s stronger connection with adults at the school.

**Supportive adults**

Goodenow’s (1993) definition of school membership emphasizes the importance of adult support for students. Chhuon & Wallace (2014) study also showed the importance of supportive adults, specifically teachers. They found that respectful teacher-student relationships, not based on stereotypes, could have a profound impact on a student’s confidence and sense of self. This was the case in how the participants in the current study talked about their relationships with caring and supportive adults.

Both Sam and Benji were able to name two adults that they felt supported them. Benji said that they didn’t feel attached to too many adults because they found it took a long time to build up trust with them. Four of the participants named their GSA sponsor
teacher as a supportive adult. Other adults that were listed were counselors, teachers, educational assistants, and youth and family workers, and administrators.

Lee listed the most teachers who they felt were supportive, and credited them with being the reason behind their successes in school. Lee also talked about how adults had been more supportive, accepting, and caring than friends in the school community.

Lee: I like know them pretty well on a personal level, with some, with various teachers and, um, yeah I’m definitely more comfortable with some of the staff than I am with the students.

Lee: Um, they’re very respectful and they treat students as though they are actual people not just students. Understanding that this is their workplace sometimes students are just viewed as business rather than human, but I find overall that the administration and teaching staff at this school are more personable in that way.

Not all interactions with teachers were respectful. Levi talked about the challenge of dealing with discrimination from teachers, and Tess felt like they were only ever seen as a stereotype by teachers.

Levi: we were trying to get the pride flag up that was a bit of a struggle cuz, I know that there were some teachers who were completely opposed to it and that just goes to show how homophobic staff can be. Even though I’m pretty sure they have to take an oath that they aren’t going to discriminate.
Levi: I feel like the staff should be making more effort to make sure that everyone feels included and like they belong and like they’re safe.

Karma: Who are the adults that care about you at school?
Tess: I don’t know. I don’t know what to say. I kind of get the sense that I’m just kind of a delinquent and they’re excited to get me out of their classroom.

For the participants who did not have a strong friendship base, it seemed that teachers filled the role of creating supportive relationships that led to a sense of belonging. Some of the participants also mentioned that they lack supportive adults at home, which confirms that adults within the school setting can be important mentors and sources of support for LGBTQ+ students. However, not all teachers are respectful and supportive of LGBTQ+ issues. It is important to support teachers to become more aware of LGBTQ+ issues and curriculum so that they do not marginalize LGBTQ+ students.

Discussion

Participants in this research study provided a rich range of experiences and ideas with which to answer the research questions. Even when the art was not analyzed it provided a conversational starting point, enhanced the meaning in the presentation of the quotes from the interviews, and allowed the participants to express themselves creatively and in an enjoyable way.

Both of the research questions were answered through the interview process. The participants defined belonging as being accepted or not judged, respected, and supported by others in the community. They did not specifically mention adults in their definitions.
They also talked a lot about identity in their interviews. When LGBTQ+ youth are accepted, then they can be their true selves. Identity is an important part of a sense of belonging in a community. For some of the participants, being identified as LGBTQ+ is very important to their connection to the community, but others did not want their identity to be associated with being LGBTQ+.

The participants felt that they belonged when they were involved in clubs, especially the GSA. They also felt that they belonged when they had supportive friends and/or adults in the school community. The participants who did not express a strong sense of belonging were not very involved in the school community and/or did not have supportive people around them.

The participants also faced barriers to belonging. Benji talked about being bullied at school for being queer and nothing being done about it. Lee talked about having to fight back against two different physical bullying incidents. All of the participants talked about going through depression or other mental health challenges. This data supports the need for comprehensive school supports for LGBTQ+ youth, such as policies against homophobic bullying and harassment, training for teachers on LGBTQ+ issues and LGBTQ+ curriculum implementation.
Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusions

Summary

A sense of belonging, or “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others—especially teachers and other adults within the school social environment” (Goodenow, 1993, pp. 60-61), is an important factor in school success and student wellbeing (Lemke et al., 2005; Aronson & Steele, 2005). School connectedness is an especially important protective factor for marginalized students such as LGBTQ+ youth; however, LGBTQ+ youth face many barriers to school belonging (Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2010; Riaz et al., 2010).

Recent provincial legislation has recognized the need for protective and inclusive school policies that encourage belonging within a school community for LGBTQ+ youth. The literature showed that having a safe place for LGBTQ+ youth is not enough. LGBTQ+ youth experience more school connectedness with comprehensive policies that include GSAs, anti-homophobic bullying policies, and training for teachers to integrate LGBTQ+ issues into the curriculum (Taylor et al., 2016). The literature also showed that LGBTQ+ youth feel they most belong in GSAs and with supportive friends and adults. There was not a lot of student voice in the literature. This study explored the ways in which school belonging, or connectedness, is experienced and expressed by LGBTQ+ youth.

As a GSA sponsor and school SOGI representative, the researcher was inspired to empower LGBTQ+ students to express their positive sense of being in a school community. The purpose of this study was to add student voice to the data on LGBTQ+ school connectedness and to justify continued support for LGBTQ+ programs and
policies in the Comox Valley. The research questions that guided the study were: How do LGBTQ+ youth define and express a sense of belonging in a school community? And where and when do LGBTQ+ youth in the Comox Valley feel that they belong in a school community?

Qualitative data was gathered through art, creative writing, and interviews with LGBTQ+ youth in the Comox Valley. Art was chosen as an option for presenting ideas because many of the members of the GSA at the researcher’s school spent time in the art room, or making art. It was thought that artistic expression would be a relevant and interesting format of sharing ideas for LGBTQ+ youth. Three of the participants completed the visual art and one of the participants completed the creative writing piece.

After transcribing the interviews about the art and the participants’ sense of belonging, the researcher coded the data using NVivo software and Mills’ (2014) tips for close reading. The themes that emerged were *acceptance* and *identity* for the definition of belonging and *GSAs, friends, and supportive adults* as the important factors to have a sense of belonging. The results supported the literature, but used some different terms for expression. The data revealed that while LGBTQ+ youth face many barriers to belonging, they are still able to express positive feelings of belonging in the school community. The participants felt that they belonged when they were involved in a GSA (or other school activity), and when they have supportive friends and adults around. Overall, LGBTQ+ youth want to freely express who they are without being judged and be accepted in the community.
Implications for LGBTQ+ policies and procedures

Because so many LGBTQ+ youth are involved and open with their LGBTQ+ identity in the Comox Valley, some adults in the school setting believe that they do not need extra support. What this study showed is that LGBTQ+ youth in the Comox Valley still experience many barriers in the school setting. In this study, the participants defined belonging as being accepted, respected and supported in their identity. The participants did not feel accepted and like they could show their true identity in every setting. The participants talked about being physically and verbally harassed and bullied by their peers in the school setting, especially in the elementary years. Research shows that victims of bullying are the least connected to school (Smith et al., 2014), so schools still have work to do in providing safe places for LGBTQ+ youth.

Bullying is also linked to mental health challenges (Smith et al., 2016). Every single participant talked about struggling at some point with mental health challenges. An example of this is in Spring’s piece where she mentions wanting to commit suicide because of her gender dysmorphia. Konishi et al. (2013) suggested that “schools can be one of the commonly hostile or unsupportive environments experienced by sexual minority youth, and may contribute to these mental health disparities” (p. 2). In order to support LGBTQ+ youth and prevent mental health challenges, policies and programs should “foster safe and supportive environments for youth of any orientation.” (Konishi et al., 2013, p. 2). The data supports a need for LGBTQ-specific mental health services, perhaps in the form of peer counselling or through community connections. The study does show how vulnerable LGBTQ+ youth are and the importance of shifting the overall climate of school to make it more welcoming.
Currently SD#71 is supportive of creating safe places for LGBTQ+ youth. Funding is provided for the district GSA meetings, GSA clubs are encouraged at each school, and the new high school renovation includes all gender-neutral washrooms. However, not all schools run a GSA and only the one school has the gender-neutral washrooms. Supportive policies and procedures need to happen at the school level at all of the schools in the Comox Valley. This could include designating gender-neutral washrooms, better advertisement for all students about GSA meetings, introductions to new students about the LGBTQ+ supports available to them, and clearer procedures being in place for dealing with homophobic or transphobic bullying.

**Supportive adults**

SD #71 has a comprehensive SOGI policy in place, but many staff members are unaware of it. When the policy first came out, teachers at each school were assigned to support the school in implementing the new policy. In some of the schools there is a SOGI binder in the staff room, but teachers forget who the SOGI representatives are. It also came out in the research that some of the participants believed that their teachers were homophobic and had other biases. They talked about how these adults will sometimes use homophobic language and undermine student’s identities by using the wrong names or pronouns. Kosciw et al. (2016) found that teachers are intervening less overall when LGBTQ+ youth are being targeted and are using more biased language themselves. This makes it particularly important to train and support all staff to become better allies who accept each student’s identity.

Schools in the Comox Valley need to revisit the district SOGI policy to see if they are meeting the needs of their LGBTQ+ students. This could be done as an in-service
training with all staff during a professional development day or during a staff meeting. Staff could then come up with ideas of how to implement the policy within their own space. This training needs to include how to create safe places for LGBTQ+ youth, how to stop homophobic bullying, and how to recognize microaggressions.

The research also highlights the importance of the adults who play positive roles in students’ lives. The participants said that the adults who they most felt supported them were the ones who respected their names and pronouns, let them be themselves, helped them through challenging times in their lives, and supported them in the classroom. They also felt that their GSA sponsors were supportive adults. These adults could act as mentors and SOGI representatives in the schools. Something that a GSA group did last year was to make appreciation cards for all supportive staff to let them know how much they meant to the group. This would be a good way to keep encouraging the staff to act as allies.

**GSAs and safe places**

Benji mentioned that the safe space rainbow stickers that teachers put on their doors was a helpful way to see which adults were allies. The research done by Wolowic, Heston, Saewyc, Porta & Eisenberg (2016) also supports the importance of rainbow flags and stickers as important visual cues for LGBTQ+ youth that they belong in a space. A good project for the GSAs next year would be to ensure that these stickers are available to staff. It was also suggested that, with permission, the art and quotes from this interview would make good posters for around the schools in the Comox Valley.

The participants talked about the GSA as one of the only safe spaces at school. This is where they made friends or most felt supported by their peers. Their responses
back up all of the research about how GSAs are so important for youth connectedness. This is even true for youth, such as Benji who do not participate in the GSA, but benefit from knowing it is there. It is important for all schools to maintain their GSAs as safe, supportive places. While the GSAs are not at the elementary schools, there should be discussion around LGBTQ+ issues and visible safe places for LGBTQ+ youth.

A place of belonging that the researcher had not predicted as being important was the art room. Two of the participants, Benji and Sam, both mentioned that it is the safe space where they feel they most belong. By allowing these students to use the art rooms at lunch or afterschool is more important than initially realized. Artwork, art clubs, art mentorship or mural projects could all be area of focus to get more LGBTQ+ students involved in school activities to enhance their connectedness. This could be shared through the GSA club sponsors or the administrators to the art teachers in each of the schools.

Benji: I find [the art room] is just where all the queer people gather for some reason…they lock the door to the outsiders and you have to go in through a different door…It’s just us and it’s a very safe space and it’s really good there.

Karma: Is there a particular space in the school that you feel most likely that you can be yourself?

Sam: Definitely the art rooms. Just because that’s kind of what I spend my entire life doing.
Friendship

Having a strong group of friends emerged as one of the most important factors in a sense of belonging for most of the participants. The participants talked about having friends’ support through some of the difficult times in their lives. It is difficult to know how to encourage friendship. This could happen through clubs or in classes, but it is also dependent on each youth’s experience and personality. It does highlight the need for socializing time during school hours. When the participants were asked for suggestion for how schools could help with their sense of belonging, some of them asked for time that they could spend with friends.

LGBTQ+ youth need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and the culture of the school so that they know they are accepted and belong. Continuing to support LGBTQ-specific programs and policies is an important step to helping LGBTQ+ youth feel a part of the school community. From their stories, it also seems that education of students and staff needs to happen more regularly and at earlier grades. The Comox Valley school district is doing well with a SOGI policy and GSAs, but there is room for improvement.

Suggestions from the participants

As part of the interview process, participants were asked if they had any suggestions for how to improve a sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ students. They responded with the following ideas:

Benji: Well I really like the posters that we have on that one wall like contained in glass with uh the pride flag and all that. I think that’s really good. I think if we
had um a lot of information about like, I don’t know, statistics and all that. Like post it around the walls of the school, it would help open people’s eyes. Because like over 50% of queer youth, like attempt suicide, like in their teens. So I think its really important to like get the message out like, because a lot of people still make jokes and think that doesn’t have an impact, like a negative impact.

Benji: I love all the little signs on the doors that say um…

Karma: Safe places?

Benji: Yes, that makes me really happy and it makes me, it makes me know that ah teachers are aware that often there aren’t safe places in schools.

Lee: Letting them know that it’s okay, and that people will still like them…and that their families won’t hate them…and that they will be okay.

Lee: General inclusivity, I think would be good. There was one thing: Dr Claire. She came and talked to all the girls at one point. I can’t remember what grade I was in, and one of the last things she said was “it is okay to be gay.” And that was, I think that was when it really like clicked that everything was going to be fine, and that I wasn’t, gonna like, it wasn’t the end of the world. So, it, it, it might not sound like much, but it takes…such, like, just little things…

Levi: I kind of want to do a school pride parade every year, annually, maybe. That way, led by the GSA, and then other people can join in and we can just have a gay time and celebrate, like, existence.
Levi: Maybe, like I know that we’ve already got posters but maybe a few more posters or like posters saying “the counsellor’s always here if you need to help, or if like you’re in the closet and you need support come to the GSA or come talk to the counselor. And whatever and just kinda like get it out there that you’re loved and cared for and that it’s not all bad.

Sam: It would just be kinda cool to like, you know, get all together and, like, have like a fun movie day or something, when you, or like a chill day…just like a day where you can kinda chill with your friends and like a bit of an appreciation day would be kinda cool.

Limitations

One of the main challenges of the research was getting enough participants to be able to make comparisons between their ideas. It was also difficult to get students from different schools. There were more interested participants who did not want to have to talk to their parents. This led to a small, biased sample of participants. Because it is such a small group of participants and because they do not represent all of the LGBTQ+ community, this study did not lead to generalizable data. Some of the data can be used to support current policies and practices in the Comox Valley, but can only be looked at as individual opinions and experiences. It may have helped to add older participants, who used to be members of GSAs in the Comox Valley.

Another limitation was only having one written art piece and not having had a follow-up interview with the participant. It was difficult to expand on the actual definition and intention behind the piece. It may have worked better only to allow for visual art and to have more time for follow-up with the participants.
Another challenge was having so many steps to the research project. The researcher had not anticipated the amount of time and follow up that it would take to get the permission forms and then the artwork back. This left little time for the follow-up interviews before the end of the school year. However, it was worth the time when the rich data came out of the art.

The final limitation was creating themes out of two different research questions: one on the definition and the other on when and where LGBTQ+ youth feel they belong. Initially this was presented as five themes together, but then it made more sense to separate them by question. It may have been clearer if the thematic analysis was done on one question.

Suggestions for further research

One of the goals of this research was to give voice to the students themselves. Almost all of the literature was based on surveys or adult voices. The data that came out of this research revealed mature, interesting ideas from the youth. There are so many more student voices to be heard. Similar art-based research and interviews could be done with LGBTQ+ youth from different school districts or countries to expand the definitions of belonging and provide more generalizable or comparable data.

It would be interesting to have more focus put on the actual voices of the participants in research. This is especially important to empower marginalized groups. Further research on belonging to a school community could be done with school groups such as international students. For example: how can schools get international students more involved in school communities? Getting more participation from vulnerable
participants could be accomplished by developing culturally relevant methods when doing research.

The focus of the data analysis in this study was on the interview transcripts and written response. In further studies, visual coding could be done using analysis tools such as Van Leeuwan and Jewitt’s (2001) iconography.

Finally, it would be interesting to follow up with the participants of this study to see what impact their sense of belonging has later in life.

**Conclusion**

The data that came out of this research can inform the culture of school communities in the Comox Valley. Hopefully, it encourages continued support of LGBTQ-specific policies and supports.

The main ideas that came out of this research were:

- Feeling accepted in a school community is one of the most important factors for wellbeing and success of LGBTQ+ youth. This could also be said for all youth.
- GSAs and school involvement can impact an LGBTQ+ student’s sense of belonging. Again, these factors have positive effects on the entire school community.
- Friendship and supportive adults are important factors in LGBTQ+ students’ connection to a school community.

It was exciting to use an emergent research method in this study. Every time a piece of art was handed in, it inspired and motivated me to support these students more. I also came back to this art throughout the thematic analysis and was able to focus on the
themes within the art. The hope is that it inspires other researchers to value art as data in the future.

The research has also made me realize how important social connections are in a school community. This is not only for students, but for adults as well. The ideas of belonging that emerged from the study have impacted my relationships with my colleagues as well. I know now the motivating factors in our lives are linked to how we fit in with others. This will inform my position as a teacher and an administrator.
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Smith, A., Stewart, D., Poon, C., Peled, M., Saewyc, E., & McCreary Centre Society


Appendix A

Goodenow's PSSM scale

*The Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Scale*

1. I feel like a real part of (name of school).
2. People here notice when I'm good at something.
3. It is hard for people like me to be accepted here. *(reversed)*
4. Other students in this school take my opinions seriously.
5. Most teachers at (name of school) are interested in me.
6. Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here. *(reversed)*
7. There's at least one teacher or other adult in this school I can talk to if I have a problem.
8. People at this school are friendly to me.
9. Teachers here are not interested in people like me. *(reversed)*
10. I am included in lots of activities at (name of school).
11. I am treated with as much respect as other students.
12. I feel very different from most other students here. *(reversed)*
13. I can really be myself at this school.
14. The teachers here respect me.
15. People here know I can do good work.
16. I wish I were in a different school. *(reversed)*
17. I feel proud of belonging to (name of school).
18. Other students here like me the way I am.

Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (Goodenow, 1993, p. 84)
Appendix B

Recruitment Letter

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
Vancouver Island University
900 Fifth Street, Nanaimo,
British Columbia, Canada V9R 5S5
Tel (250) 740-6221 Fax (250) 740-6463
http://www.viu.ca/education/

Invitation to Participate
A Study of LGBTQ+ Youth and Sense of School Belonging

Principal Investigator: Karma Taiji
Masters in Education Student
Vancouver Island University
[Email removed]

Rachel Moll, Ph.D., Supervisor
Faculty of Education
Vancouver Island University

You are invited to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Karma Taiji, the GSA sponsor teacher at Mark R. Isfeld Secondary and a Masters student in the Faculty of Education at Vancouver Island University. You are being invited to participate because you self identify as being part of the LGBTQ+ community and are a middle school or high school student in School District #71 in the Comox Valley.

*Important: This study requires that you have parental consent. This means that your parents or guardians will need to know that you self identify as being part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Purpose: The study will be exploring when and where LGBTQ+ students feel they belong in a school community. I want to gain a student perspective on sense of belonging. I want to know what sort of school relationships and supports students have that allow them to feel they belong in a school community. I hope that this research may inform my teaching, and what we can do as a school community to help others feel that they belong and can succeed. Through this research, I hope to not only give LGBTQ+ youth a voice in the research, but also add local context data to the research.

Benefits: As a participant, you may find the artistic expression and/or having a conversation with the interviewer as a positive experience that allows you to recognize your part in a school community. You may also enjoy going through the stages of writing or creating art.

What you will be asked to do: You will need to get parental consent to do this study. By participating in this study you may choose to do an artistic representation (visual arts or
written) of belonging and/or an individual interview about belonging. For the artistic portion you will be asked to create a piece of art (such as a drawing or painting) or creative writing (such as poetry or short story) that expresses a time or place that you have felt you belong at school. This artwork would then be given to me or photographed or copied to use as data in my final thesis. I would be looking for common themes (such as colours or words) in the artwork. I am also looking for participants to do one-on-one interviews about belonging at school that would be audio recorded. These interviews would take approximately 20-30 minutes. Both the artistic portion and interview portion of the study would require your consent to use the artwork and/or quotes in the final data set. If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to complete the artwork on your own time by the first week of December. Interviews will take place in November and early December.

**Data:** All of the artwork and interviews that I gather as data may be used in my final thesis. I plan to present my findings at a conference at VIU in Spring 2017, in my thesis paper as part of the requirements for the MEDL degree, and to staff in School District #71 at staff meetings and as a speaker at professional development days. It may also be published online in the VIU library VIUSpace as a thesis.

**Risks:** All responses and artwork will be presented under pseudonyms that you would choose yourself; however, you may be identifiable by your artwork or quotes, or through your involvement in the study. To keep your information as confidential as possible, there will be no sharing of data that has defining characteristics such as age, gender identity, or school.

Participation in this study is purely voluntary and parental consent is needed. You may withdraw from this study at any time for any reason without explanation. Even if your parent/guardian provides written consent for you to participate in this study, you can still choose not to participate. To indicate your interest and receive an assent form and parental consent form please send an email to [email removed].
Appendix C

Recruitment Poster

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Do you identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community?

If you are a student in middle school or high school in the Comox Valley and identify as LGBTQ+ you can provide input into a study of school belonging.

**PURPOSE:** Identify the supports that help students belong and succeed in a school community by looking at common themes in art and interviews.

**BENEFITS:** Gives LGBTQ+ students a voice in the research and helps teachers and the school community understand the place of LGBTQ+ students in a school community. Participants may enjoy feeling a sense of belonging and enjoy making art.

**MAKE ART**

**WRITE CREATIVELY**

**TAKE PART IN A PERSONAL INTERVIEW**

You can choose any of these ways to provide input on school belonging for LGBTQ+ youth.

*Your real name, age, and school will not be used in the data to identify you. Parental consent required. This means you will need to tell your parents that you identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community.*

To find out more or to volunteer to participate, please contact Karma Taiji, the GSA sponsor at Isfeld Secondary.

This study is being conducted by a Masters student in Education from Vancouver Island University.

**FACULTY OF EDUCATION - VANCOURVER ISLAND UNIVERSITY**

900 Fifth Street, Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada V9R 5S5

Tel (250) 740-6211 Fax (250) 740-6463 www.viu.ca/education/
Appendix D

Recruitment Script

Hello, and thank you for allowing me to share this information today. My name is Karma Taiji and I am a high school teacher at Mark R. Isfeld Secondary School. I have been the teacher sponsor for the school GSA for the past two years. I am currently working to complete my Masters degree in Educational Leadership at Vancouver Island University. As part of the degree, I am being asked to design and conduct research related to education.

I am interested in researching how students who identify as being part of the LGBTQ+ community feel like they belong in a school community. I want to see and hear about what sort of school relationships and supports LGBTQ+ students have that allow them to feel they belong in a school community. I hope that this research may help me as a teacher, and can help others in the school community to enable LGBTQ+ youth and all students feel that they belong and can succeed. Through this research, I hope to not only give LGBTQ+ youth a voice in the research, but also to see what school belonging looks like in the Comox Valley.

I am looking for students who self-identify as being part of the LGBTQ+ community. This can be anyone who feels part of the community, and they do not need to tell me how they identify. Those students who choose to participate in this study will be asked to create a piece of art (such as a drawing or painting) or creative writing (such as poetry or short story) that expresses a time or place that they have felt they belong at school. I would keep this art or take photos of it so that I can look for common themes in them. I am also looking for participants to do a one-on-one interview about belonging at school that would be audio recorded. These interviews would take approximately 20-30
minutes. If you choose to participate, you may do the artistic portion of the study only, both the art and the interview, or just the interview portion of the study.

There may be some benefits to being part of this study. As a participant, you may find the artistic expression and/or having a conversation with the interviewer as a positive experience that allows you to recognize your part in a school community. You may also enjoy going through the stages of writing or creating art.

If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to complete the artwork on your own time by the first week of December. This means that you will have one month to complete the artwork. Interviews will take place in November for interview only participants and interviews for art and interview participants will take place in early December. All of the interviews will take place outside of school time and will take place at your school or mine, depending on what works for you.

One of the most important things to know about this research project, if that in order to participate, you must have PARENTAL CONSENT. This means that you will either have to disclose to your parents that you identify as being part of the LGBTQ+ community or they will have to already know.

I want to keep your information confidential, so all responses and artwork will be presented under fake names that you would choose yourself; however, some people may figure out who you are because of your artwork or quotes. There is a risk too that other people see you talking to me and know that you are part of the study. This could potentially lead to people finding out that you are part of the LGBTQ+ community. To keep your information as confidential as possible, there will be no sharing of information such as your age, gender identity, or school, but I cannot guarantee that people will not find out that you are part of the study.

Participation in this study is purely voluntary and will not influence how I see you as your teacher or as the sponsor of the GSA. As a reminder, I require permission from your parents for you to participate in the study. Please consider bringing the invitation to participate home and ask them to consider your participation in this study. You may withdraw from this study at any time for any reason without explanation. Even if your parent/guardian provides written consent for you to participate in this study, you can still choose not to participate.

Please read the invitation to participate and consider getting in touch with me by email to arrange for me to get the assent and consent form to you. Thanks again for listening.
Appendix E

Consent form for parents

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
Vancouver Island University
900 Fifth Street, Nanaimo,
British Columbia, Canada V9R 5S5
Tel (250) 740-6221 Fax (250) 740-6463
http://www.viu.ca/education/

A Study of LGBTQ+ Youth and Sense of School Belonging

Principal Investigator: Karma Taiji
Masters in Education Student
Vancouver Island University
[email removed]

Rachel Moll, Ph.D., Supervisor
Faculty of Education
Vancouver Island University
[Email removed]

Your child has been invited to join a research study to look at where and when LGBTQ+ (gender and sexuality non-conforming) students feel they belong in a school community. Your child was invited to participate in this study because they are a high school or middle school student in School District #71 who self identifies as LGBTQ+.

Purpose: I want to gain a student perspective on sense of belonging. I want to know what sort of school relationships and supports students have that allow them to feel they belong in a school community. I hope that this research may inform my teaching, and what we can do as a school community to help others feel that they belong and can succeed. Through this research, I hope to not only give LGBTQ+ youth a voice in the research, but also add local information to the research.

I will collect artwork (visual or written) and run individual interviews to gather data about school belonging. The artwork will be photographed or kept so that I can look for common themes. I will also be looking for common themes in the interviews. Results (photos of artwork and quotes from interviews) will be presented in my final thesis, at a Masters conference in Spring 2017, and potentially to other staff in School District #71.

Potential Benefits: Participants may find the artistic expression and/or having a conversation with the interviewer as a positive experience that allows them to recognize their part in a school community. They may also enjoy going through the stages of writing or creating art.

Please take time to discuss this study with your child and anyone else you wish to. The decision to let your child join, or not to join, is up to you.
What’s involved in the Study?
Your child will be asked to:

1. Sign an assent form and return it to me, Karma Taiji, by email or in person.
2. Get parents/guardians to sign the consent form and return it to me, Karma Taiji, by email or in person.
3. Choose to do the art portion and/or the interview portion of the study.
4. Choose a pseudonym (fake name) that they would like to be called in all of the data.
5. If you give permission for them to do the study and they would like to do the art portion, they will be emailed an explanation of what to do. They would follow a prompt and guidelines to create a piece of visual or written art that reflects a time or place they have felt a sense of belonging to a school community. They will have one month to complete this art on their own time and arrange for me to pick it up.
6. Provide consent (or not) for the artwork to be photographed as data.
7. If you give permission for them to do the study and they would like to do the interview, the interview will take place in a mutually agreed upon time and location.
8. Take part in a 30-minute interview in November or December of 2016 at my school, Isfeld Secondary, or their school outside of school time. I will be the interviewer and no one else will be present during the interviews.
9. Consent (or not) to having the interviews audio recorded to ensure for accurate transcription and consent (or not) to having quotes used in the final presentation of data.

Potential risks:
While every effort will be made to keep identifying information confidential, there is a possibility that participants may be identifiable from their artwork or quotes. There is also a possibility that they may be identifiable as being part of the LGBTQ+ community because it is so small. Sexuality and gender can be sensitive topics and so there could be the possibility of feeling anxiety or stress when taking part in this study. There is a possibility that taking part in this study could bring up negative feelings of not belonging to a school community. If at any point during or after the study, you or your child feels they need support, please see the school counsellor or contact one of the following parent resources:

Vancouver Island 24 Hour Crisis line (www.cvics.ca): 1-888-494-3888
BCTF LGBTQ Resources: https://bctf.ca/SocialJustice.aspx?id=17990
BC Council for Families QT*Tip sheet: https://www.bccf.ca/bccf/resources/qt-tip-sheets/
Qmunity: http://qmunity.ca/learn/resources/
Vancouver School Board Questions and Answers for Parents and Family Members of Gender Variant and Transgendered Youth: http://www.vch.ca/media/VSB-Parent-Trans-Q&A-Unlocked.pdf
Family Acceptance Project: familyproject.sfsu.edu
PFLAG Transgender Network: community.pflag.org
Confidentiality:
I will know who your child is throughout the study, so they will not be anonymous. All data will be stored and reported on confidentially. Participants will only be identified by a pseudonym (fake name) of their choice at all parts of the study. No other defining characteristics, such as age or school, will be used in the presentation of data. All of the information, artwork and data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet for three years and then destroyed. Electronic information will be kept on an encrypted and password-protected USB drive.

Contact for information about the study:
If you have any questions about this study, you may contact Karma Taiji at [phone number removed] or email: [email removed]

Concerns about your child’s treatment in the research:
If you have any concerns about your child’s treatment as a participant in this research, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Officer at reb@viu.ca or by telephone at (250) 753-3245 (ext. 2665).

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your child has the right not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time. Deciding not to participate or choosing to leave the study will not result in any penalty to your child and it will not harm their relationship with me. If your child decides to leave the study, they may contact me by email and let me know that they wish to withdraw.

Permission for a Child to Participate in Research

As parent or legal guardian, I authorize _________________________________ (child’s name) to become a participant in the research study described in this form.

Child’s Date of Birth ____________________  Today’s date ____________________

_________________________________________  __________________________________
(Parent or Legal Guardian’s Signature)  (Print Name)
Appendix F

Assent form for students

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
Vancouver Island University
900 Fifth Street, Nanaimo,
British Columbia, Canada V9R 5S5
Tel (250) 740-6221 Fax (250) 740-6463
http://www.viu.ca/education/

A Study of LGBTQ+ Youth and Sense of School Belonging

Principal Investigator: Karma Taiji
Masters in Education Student
Vancouver Island University
[email removed]

Rachel Moll, Ph.D., Supervisor
Faculty of Education
Vancouver Island University
[email removed]

*Important: This study requires that you have parental consent. This means that your parents or guardians will need to know that you self identify as being part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Purpose:
You are being asked to participate in this study on school belonging because you are a high school or middle school student in the Comox Valley School District #71 who self identifies as LGBTQ+. The research study will be looking at where and when LGBTQ+ students feel they belong in a school community. I want to gain a student perspective on sense of belonging. I want to know what sort of school relationships and supports students have that allow them to feel they belong in a school community. I hope that this research may inform my teaching, and what we can do as a school community to help others feel that they belong and can succeed. Through this research, I hope to not only give LGBTQ+ youth a voice in the research, but also add local information to the research.

I will collect artwork (visual or written) and run individual interviews to gather data about school belonging. The artwork will be photographed or kept so that I can look for common themes. I will also be looking for common themes in the interviews. Results (photos of artwork and quotes from interviews) will be presented in my final thesis, at a Masters conference in Spring 2017, and potentially to other staff in School District #71.

Benefits: As a participant, you may find the artistic expression and/or having a conversation with the interviewer as a positive experience that allows you to recognize your part in a school community. You may also enjoy going through the stages of writing or creating art.
Study procedures:
If you decide that you want to be part of this study, you will be asked to:
1. Sign this assent form and return it to me, Karma Taiji.
2. Get your parents/guardians to sign the consent form and return it to me, Karma Taiji.
3. Choose if you want to do the art portion and/or the interview portion of the study.
4. Choose a pseudonym (fake name) that you would like to be called in all of the data.
5. If your parent gives permission for you to do the study and you would like to do the art portion, you will be emailed an explanation of what to do. You would follow a prompt and guidelines to create a piece of visual or written art that reflects a time or place you have felt a sense of belonging to a school community. You will have one month to complete this art on your own time and arrange for me to pick it up from you.
6. Provide consent (or not) for the artwork to be photographed as data.
7. If your parent or guardian gives permission for you to do the study and you would like to do the interview, the interview will take place in a mutually agreed upon time and location.
8. Take part in a 30-minute interview in November or December of 2016 at my school, Isfeld Secondary, or your school outside of school time. I will be the interviewer and no one else will be present during the interviews.
9. Consent (or not) to having the interviews audio recorded to ensure for accurate transcription and consent (or not) to having quotes used in the final presentation of data.

Potential risks:
While every effort will be made to keep identifying information confidential, there is a possibility that people may find out who you are from your artwork or quotes. There is also a possibility that you may be identifiable as being part of the LGBTQ+ community because it is so small. If your parents or guardians do not already know that you identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, it may be difficult to tell them or they may find out through the consent process.

Sexuality and gender can be sensitive topics and so there could be the possibility of feeling anxiety or stress when taking part in this study. There is a possibility that taking part in this study could bring up negative feelings of not belonging to a school community. If at any point during or after the study, you feel you need support, please see your school counsellor or contact one of the resources below:

Kids Help Phone (www.kidshelpphone.ca): 1-800-668-6868
Vancouver Island 24 Hour Crisis line (www.cvics.ca): 1-888-494-3888
Youth in BC chat (www.YouthinBC.com)
LGBT Youth Line (www.youthline.ca): 1-800-268-9688
Child and Youth Mental Health-MCFD Courtenay: (250) 334-5820
St. Joseph's Hospital Youth Mental Health Services: (250) 339-2242
Child & Adolescent Suicide Prevention: contact David Hext at (250) 702-6880

Confidentiality:
I will know who you are throughout the study and so you will not be anonymous. All data will be stored and reported on without using your name, age, school or any other identifying characteristics. You will only be identified by a pseudonym (fake name) of your choice in all parts of the study. No other defining characteristics, such as age or school, will be used in the presentation of data. All of the information, artwork and data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet for three years and then destroyed. If you could like your artwork back at any time during the study or in the next three years, you may ask for it.

Contact for information about the study:
If you have any questions about this study, you may contact me, Karma Taiji, at [phone number removed] or email [email removed].

Concerns about your treatment in the research:
If you have any concerns about your treatment as a participant in this research, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Officer at reb@viu.ca or by telephone at (250) 753-3245 (ext. 2665).

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to be. If you decide to stop after we begin, that’s okay too even if your parents have signed the consent form. You just need to contact me by email to let me know that you wish to withdraw.

If you decide you want to be in this study, please sign your name. Please also indicate your consent (or not) for the following parts of the study:

I would like to take part in: Artistic expression Art and Interview Interview only

I consent to having my art photographed. Yes No

I consent to having the interview audio recorded. Yes No

I consent to allow the researcher to use direct quotations from my interview in the presentation of results. Yes No

____________________   ______________________
(Print name here)        (Sign name here)

____________________
(Date)

____________________
(your email contact)
Appendix G

Artistic representation guidelines and prompt

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this artistic expression component of the research study on LGBTQ+ youth and sense of belonging in a school community. Please think about the following prompt and decide how you want to present your ideas:

Represent in artistic form (written or visual) a time or place you have felt a sense of belonging in a school community.

School belonging could be defined as “the extent to which [you] feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others—especially teachers and other adults within the school social environment” (Goodenow, 1993, pp. 60-61). You may define “belonging” in your own words.

There are no restrictions on what type of visual or written art you choose to use. Some of examples of the types of art that you may decide to use include:

**Visual Art**
- Drawing
- Cartooning
- Painting
- Printmaking

**Written Expression**
- Poetry
- Short Story
- Play
- Song

You have one month, until December 5th, 2016, to complete your art. Please email Karma Taiji at [email removed] if you have any questions about this part of the research and when you have completed your art piece. She will arrange with you a mutually agreed upon time and place to photograph the piece or to pick it up to use as data. The pieces will be looked at for common themes.
Appendix H

Interview script and questions

Hello, nice to see you. I will start the audio recording now as I see you have provided consent to have this interview recorded.

Thank you so much for taking part in the interview portion of this research study. My name is Karma Taiji and I am the GSA sponsor from Isfeld Secondary and the person running this study. This interview is informal. I have some questions that I would like to ask you, but we do not need to get to them all. Also, if you do not feel like answering a question at anytime you can just say “Pass”. Please feel free to add any information that you want and to change the questions if you want. This interview will take approximately 20-30 minutes. You may stop the interview at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

I would first like to define belonging as “the extent to which [you] feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others-especially teachers and other adults within the school social environment” (Goodenow, 1993, pp. 60-61). You may add or change this definition as you see fit throughout the interview.

First of all, did you take part in the artistic expression part of this study? (If yes)
1. Can you explain your art piece to the researcher?
2. How does your artistic piece reflect your feelings of belonging at school?
3. Why did you choose to do an artistic representation of belonging?

Questions for all participants:
13. How do you define belonging in a school community?
14. Do you feel you can be yourself at school? How? Where?
15. How do you feel a part of your school community?
16. Where do you feel you most belong in your school community? Why?
17. What spaces at school make you feel like you belong?
18. Without naming names, who are the adults that care about you at your school?
19. Without naming names, who are the peers that care about you at your school?
20. Do you feel that other people respect you at school? How?
21. What are the activities that you are involved in at school?
22. What are the events at school that make you feel like you belong?
23. Do you feel that you make a positive impact on your school community? How?
24. Do you have any suggestions for improving your sense of belonging in your school community?
25. What are some of the challenges or barriers that you have faced to belonging at your school community?
26. Do you have any further stories or ideas about belonging in a school community that you would like to add?
27. Do you have any questions for me?

That is the end of the interview. Thanks again for all of your ideas. It was a pleasure speaking with you. If you feel any distress or anxiety about issues that were brought up during the interview I would encourage you to speak to your school counsellor as soon as possible.

(Provide a list of crisis resources on a business card).

**Kids Help Phone** ([www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)): 1-800-668-6868
**Vancouver Island 24 Hour Crisis line** ([www.cvics.ca](http://www.cvics.ca)): 1-888-494-3888
**Youth in BC chat** ([www.YouthinBC.com](http://www.YouthinBC.com))
**LGBT Youth Line** ([www.youthline.ca](http://www.youthline.ca)): 1-800-268-9688
**Child and Youth Mental Health-MCFD Courtenay**: (250) 334-5820
**St. Joseph’s Hospital Youth Mental Health Services**: (250) 339-2242
**Child & Adolescent Outreach / Suicide Prevention**: contact David Hext at (250) 702-6880
Appendix I

Wordle from NVivo

Word frequency query from interviews and creative writing piece