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Digital Literacies And "glee": The Role Of Fan Fiction Virtual Writing And Social Commentary In Response To Bullying Themes With Adolescent Writers

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DIGITAL LITERACIES AND "GLEE": THE ROLE OF FAN FICTION VIRTUAL WRITING AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY IN RESPONSE TO BULLYING THEMES WITH ADOLESCENT WRITERS

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Jason, who allowed me to dream beyond the typical expectations for a teacher and a mom. He never wavered in his firm belief that I was capable of doctorate level work, and that I should never settle for less than my highest dream. I could not have done this without his encouragement, time, sacrifice, and support to finish this process. I am truly lucky to have found my true love, who was willing to put my needs above his and take over so much of the day to day care of our family. To my boys, Jackson and Seamus, I love you, and I hope that you will remember that Mom didn't study all the time, and that you are always the center of my world.

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CHAPTER 1- INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

As a former musical theater performer, when the TV program *Glee*, which is centered around a show choir group of misfits, premiered, I became an instant "Gleek" (as fans of the show are nicknamed). Consequently, it seemed like a natural connection, when I began to research online literacies, that I started reading fan fiction devoted to my favorite show. One popular online site for fan fiction writing is fanfiction.net, which is where I began my interaction with virtual fan writing. While exploring this site, I was amazed at the variety of writing genres/styles, the creativity of the stories, and the sheer volume of contributions published by loyal fans. As a "Gleek" vested in the show vernacular, I was able to screen for storylines that were of particular interest to me and I quickly acclimated to the fan specific language and terminology (e.g., "Finnchel" for the Finn/Rachel romance story line or getting "slushied," which is a *Glee*-developed verb for having a slushie dumped on your head by a bully).

The posts that I was intrigued by involved a storyline about the relationship between two homosexual male characters; Kurt Hummel and David Karofsky. This plot line originally began with abusive, violent bullying from the football player, David, directed toward the openly gay, showtune- loving character of Kurt. However, as the storyline evolved, the show writers started a crush-type romance between Dave and Kurt, which I found profoundly disturbing, due to the brutality of their first interactions. On the fan fiction site, participants began writing "Kurtofsky" (Kurt/Dave pairing) romances in response to this plot twist, which I read avidly to see the participant reaction to this unexpected pairing. One author, "TheFirstMrsHummel", wrote a poignant story about this relationship that received over 200 reviews from fans. What I found interesting was that the author ("TheFirstMrsHummel") was struggling to make sense of the romance, and was using the writing to work through his fascination with the pairing, which initially

repulsed him. In his author's notes, he writes that he "started it [his writing] as his own kind of therapy" and that "fanfiction for me is a way to control what I can't ever really hope to control." The reviewer comments in response to his writing echoed similar conflicting emotions and real-life connections to the story, protesting the perceived bigotry shown on the show, and frequent debate on whether the kiss between the two characters was sexual assault or a romantic moment.

The passionate and revealing inner thoughts of the author, published for all to see, as well as the heated debate and fervent support through requests for more writing, eventually led me to the core question that was researched in this study (see p. 16). My research examined how participants' opinions, feelings, or understandings are affected as they write, read, and review on the virtual fan fiction site, www.fanfiction.net, in response to episodes of *Glee* that contain LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgendered) storylines. For example, how might participants' viewpoints in regard to acceptance of diversity, particularly homosexuality, are altered (either in a positive or negative way) as they write, post, read or review on the fan fiction site and interact with other participants? By exploring a question like this, it is my intent that educators and those interested in the literacy events of adolescent lives can better appreciate the role of fan fiction and the virtual writers' community in developing adolescent writers and readers who are supportive of marginalized LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgendered) youth and allowing participants the opportunity to become more accepting of diversity

Introduction to the Study

Today, writing, far removed from the restrictions of the traditional pen and paper past, can be published at the click of a button, with active asynchronous and synchronous means of review and response from a world-wide audience. The authors, readers, and reviewers of online writing

form virtual writing communities where, much of the time, they encourage, inspire, and offer constructive critique for each other's writing.

One outcome of sharing and responding to writing is that, through the process, participants also explore other ways of thinking (Graves, 2004). Virtual writing websites have "vastly simplified the process of finding and joining" a writing community (Driscoll & Gregg, 2011, p. 570). The interaction among online communities of writers, the relationships they develop, and the effects of the discussions around writing and the themes of the writing are central to this research.

In this chapter, I will introduce and explain the genre of fan fiction, including its immense growth in popularity among teenage writers (Tosenberger, 2008). Then, I will address the research area and the significance of this research in relation to knowledge and understanding of the literacy processes of adolescent readers and writers. After the statement of the problem, I will describe the television program *Glee*, which, over its six-year run, has achieved immense popularity, in part because of its cutting edge LGBT plotlines, its premise regarding challenging the social structure of the typical public high school, and the treatment of students among and between the social strata of a public high school. The goal of this chapter is to introduce the topic of my proposed research, which questions how the interactions among adolescent participants on the Glee pages of FanFiction.net may contribute to refinements in empathy, behavior, and understanding of difference and diversity; particularly as it relates to LGBT teens and bullying

Fan fiction

Fan fiction, which is online writing devoted to a media experience (e.g., book, TV, movie, or game), is increasingly popular with teenagers today (Mathew & Adams, 2009). As a genre of writing, fan fiction is "writing, whether official or unofficial, paid or unpaid, which makes use of

an accepted canon of characters, settings, and plots generated by another writer or writers" (Pugh, 2005, p. 25). There are entire websites where participants can publish their writing connected with pop culture literature such as the young adult literature series *The Hunger Games* and *The Host*. The Internet has made it possible for frequent, instantaneous, and ongoing interaction among participants that share these interests (Banet-Weiser et al., 2014). Fan fiction writing allows adolescent writers to utilize their favorite stories, plots and characters as the basis for creative writing and as a means to explore characters, issues, and themes that are of interest or concern to them. Tosenberger (2014), divides the genre into two categories which she calls affirmative and transformational fandom. Affirmative fan fiction writing is closely connected to the original material, and is heavily contextual, searching for answers and authors' or producers' true purposes in creating the source work. Transformational fan fiction writing takes the source materials and manipulates, corrects, or changes it according to the fan's purposes, for creativity and fun or to reflect areas that the fan may feel need correction (alternate endings, changes in sexual orientation, etc.). Fan fiction writing bridges the individualized, diverse media interests of adolescents to a virtual platform for creative expression that allows for social interaction with peers. Both affirmative and transformational forms of fan fiction writing are reflective of higher level analysis (Tosenberger, 2014), and closely connect with the literacy goals of educators, even linked with aspects of the Common Core state standards (W11-12.3 and 12.6), which discuss publishing and narrative writing. Fan fiction writing is important in relation to adolescent literacy because it provides the opportunity for students to find a niche that connects with their interests as well as motivating them to participate in literacy events that can improve their critical reading and writing skills.

Although some have criticized fan fiction writing as nothing more than "The raiding of

mass culture…as a starting point for their own writing" (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003) or "textual poaching" (Roozen, 2009), there is ample evidence that writers of fan fiction are creating their own unique interpretations using available digital resources (Jwa, 2012). Interpreting the media object of their devotion has led to multitudes of websites and fans, all plugged into the virtual space of written fandom. Fan fiction is a fascinating source for research, with its community and creative aspects available virtually, making the genre and website very popular through easy accessibility. As will be explored in detail in chapter two, fan fiction and the writing of fan fiction has potentially enormous implications for students' development as readers, writers, and critical thinkers, as well as for building traits of empathy, care, and understanding.

English teachers have a long tradition of requiring students to "write a new ending" to a classic text (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Romanenkova, 2014), creating "happily ever after" for Romeo and Juliet, or having Rip Van Winkle wake up in current times. However, the genre of fan fiction coupled with sites such fanfiction.net, brings the idea of rewriting aspects of canonical and non-canonical literature to a new level because it enables writers to use 21st century technologies in creative, collaborative, and evocative ways. For example, in fan fiction, writers can take on the persona of different characters in collaborative writing, engage in episodic writing in response to new shows/sequels, and incorporate creative twists like IPod play lists or visual graphics to reflect their interpretation of stories. Elea (2012) describes the interaction and construction of the writing/design as "dynamic" while Vasudevan writes about the commonality of "seamless incorporation of communicative modes" (2010) in this genre.

Fan fiction writers also have endless options for virtual support and fans for their writing, and an open communication at any time for feedback and advice about their writing area of interest. With the ease of internet access, fan fiction numbers expanded, and the expansion into social

networking made the writing and publishing easily adaptable to daily interaction (Driscoll & Gregg, 2011). Writers in the fan fiction community often co-write, even participating in open forums about their topics, and the web offers new ways and spaces for the community members to interact, allowing innovative connections among the community (Banet-Weiser et al., 2014). Readers and fans of the fan fiction genre have the opportunity to post or instant message directly with the writers, offering an opportunity for instant positive reinforcement and encouragement about what they are creating, which can be qualitatively very different than the writing experiences they may have in school. Elea (2012) claims that the participants "want to write about current issues and share what they write, getting feedback about their creations and feeling recognized in an environment in which affective exchanges and content with peers is permanent and they are surrounded by friends" (p. 840), which is exactly what digital fan fiction communities provide. Although it is possible in this genre to post negative reviews and communications, the site provides strict guidelines and etiquette expectations for participants (https://www.fanfiction.net/topic/), methods for reporting abusive reviewers, and numerous blogs regarding how to respond to negative reviewers or "Flamers" (Kelbl, 2013). When reading the blogs and support posts on the site (https://www.fanfiction.net/topic/2872/71584806/Reserch-How-to-deal-with-Flamers) it is clear that the fans themselves police and report reviewers that are negative to writers, to preserve the positive climate of their writing space.

Fanfiction.net

The website www.fanfiction.net combines current media, social commentary, and technology in an original and exciting way for young people to use creative writing as a means for self-expression. With over 107,000 posts connected with one TV show alone (https://www.fanfiction.net/tv/, 2014), the immense popularity of this format is undeniable and

deserves a closer examination to see what makes this genre appealing to its users. When looking at the posts on Fanfiction.net under the popular *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* book series, there are almost one million different pieces of published writing by fans in this space, and that is only one website with a very narrow focus in texts. Expand that concept of fan fiction writing to all of the television, movie, anime, game, and book options, as well as including the endless possibilities for forum discussion/interaction and reader participants/reviewers, and one can begin to appreciate the enormous popularity of this site. The ability for expression may appeal to some participants, as "The literacies of children and youth in a Web 2.0 landscape are replete with acts of self-representation and expressive declarations" (Vasudevan, 2010, p. 44), but the relative feeling of safety and privacy that a virtual website gives may appeal to others.

The program *Glee*, which includes LGBT characters, has introduced provocative plotlines around stereotypical gender roles, same-sex dating, and marginalized youth experiences in a typical public high school social system. Violence, angst, tragedy, and hurt are all genre categories of writing on fanfiction.net in regard to this show. When searching the over one hundred thousand posts related to *Glee,* one can find thousands of stories related to bullying, and LGBT prejudice/non-acceptance themed entries. Some are violent. In *Promises,* by fan fiction writer LegendaryKurtHummel, Kurt (a homosexual male student character in the program) is brutally raped by another student in the locker room, as punishment for telling another student about their same-sex kiss. "Reaching Out" (by armand555) places Kurt in the hospital as a result of a suicide attempt as a result of in-school bullying. From cyberbullying, verbal abuse, and into the violence that is often shown on the news today, fan fiction writers cover the gamut of LGBT bullying scenarios with active responses from readers asking for more and more entries.

On fanfiction.net, the writers' identities are protected by screen names and self-created

profiles, allowing for participants to share as much or as little of their personal information with other fan fiction participants (both writers and audience) as they choose. The privacy policy (https://www.fanfiction.net/privacy/, 2014) includes restrictions on information sharing limits, and the security of personal information and Norton's safe web evaluation of the site (https://safeweb.norton.com/report/show_mobile?name=fanfiction.net) rates it as having no computer, identity, or annoyance threats. With the relative privacy, participants post revealing and provocative writing, pushing the envelope on controversial topics and opinions that students may not express in classroom writing.

Statement of the Problem

The recent media attention on the issue of bullying, specifically the bullying of LGBT young adults by other young adults has brought this issue to the attention of the nation. Recent reports of suicides by LGBT teens as a direct result of the social and psychological effects of bullying due to their sexuality have pushed the nation as a whole, and education in particular, to address this issue in order to protect all of our children and young adults. Examples like Billy Lucas, a teenager from Indiana, who hanged himself after repeated anti-gay bullying, or Seth Walsh, only 13 years of age, who could not face another day of what his classmates described as a "relentless barrage of taunting" (McKinley-NY Times, 2010) continue to flood the media and rally efforts to anti-bullying initiatives. One of the more publicized suicides as a result of anti-gay bullying was Tyler Clementi, a Rutgers freshman, who jumped off the George Washington Bridge after his roommate used a webcam to record Tyler kissing a male student, and streamed it live over the Internet (NY times, 2012).

There is no question that our LGBT youth need support, the opportunity to express their feelings and identity as they navigate the social world, and acceptance in the community. As the

mainstream media, especially aimed at young people, maintains its heteronormative theme, fan fiction can be an outlet of expression as "recursive literature that, whether out of preference or necessity, circulates outside of the 'official' institutional setting of commercial publishing" (Tosenberger, 2014, p. 16). This research explores the virtual writing and interactions in the fan fiction community related to LGBT bullying (a main theme of the program), the possibilities of participants to explore social justice issues related to sexual/gender identity, and the appeal of this particular genre and digital process to the fan community.

To take on the task of social justice and acceptance of diversity, some educators indicate that the English classroom, where themes related to humanity, relationships, and character are often explored through reading and writing, may be the logical choice for further instruction about equality and support. In his chapter titled "Literacy Issues and GLBTQ Youth: Queer Interventions in English Education," in The Handbook of Literacy Research, Martino (2009) asserts that "The English language arts classroom is a productive site for examining the limits of normalcy through promoting reading practices that open up possibilities for interrogating heteronormativity". In other words, if we are trying to help students be aware of bias and create a culture of acceptance among our students, the reading/writing classroom is a perfect avenue for such exploration. Creative writing classrooms encourage self-expression and peer support through the writing process, which ties to the ideas of acceptance and respect needed for sensitive issues. The recommended curriculum for secondary English classrooms includes novels with weighty social justice themes (e.g., *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Color Purple*), lends itself to the logical extension of classroom exploration and discussion of societal expectations, cultural norms and differences, and how we as humans function in that world.

As educators, we strive to prevent negative experiences that could drastically affect a

child's education, and also to educate the student body to be accepting of differences and aware of social injustice concerns. To ensure that students participate and are engaged in this instruction, it cannot be a separated "character" class, but deeply embedded in the curriculum that they have every day in their education career. The popular genre of fan fiction and the low risk interactions on a virtual site, along with the ease of access for students could be a motivating force to join bullying prevention, writing instruction, and inherent motivation for digitally focused students into a proposal that could have vast benefits for the students and improve the climate of the public school system. While I am not necessarily advocating that fan fiction writing should be included in all classrooms, with all educators, the genre and platform allows for students to express themselves with less risk, allows for meaningful conversations to occur, and can open the student experience to different cultures and viewpoints that may expand student understanding of diversity.

The Television Program *Glee*

One of the most popular fan fiction sites on Fanfiction.net focuses on the hit TV show *Glee*, which first aired in 2009. The program struck a chord with viewers, particularly young adults, with its edgy social commentary in relation to hot button issues, such as sexual identity, bullying, and the social structure of adolescent culture. Now having completed the sixth and final season at the time of this writing, the show broke new ground as a drama/comedy that is embedded with musical numbers. The main storylines followed a high school student cast of characters as they dealt with social issues and pressures, bullying, romance, and a shared love for show choir. The plots on this button-pushing show have included teenage sex (both heterosexual and homosexual), bullying, "closeted" homosexual issues, domestic abuse, eating disorders, and cross dressing, all under the theme of individuality and social acceptance.

The characters and plot points of *Glee* have deviated from the stereotypical norm, where the only openly homosexual characters are often side stories at best, with sanitized plot lines. Instead, *Glee,* featured multiple homosexual characters, of both genders, and their relationship storylines were often at the forefront of the episodes. Meyer and Wood (2013) described the show as having "…an abundance of queer sexualities represented. In this way, the show deviates from traditional teen television narratives where queer identity is not often considered one of the "facts of life." LGBT supporters have also commented on *Glee* and its treatment of homosexual characters in a positive light, which is the goal of the show writers and producers; "*Glee* creators have claimed that the show is cutting edge in its positive portrayal of underdogs. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) seems to concur, for they awarded it best comedy show in 2011" (Falter, 2013-14, p. 290).

In many ways, the characters and storyline of *Glee* use the typical Midwestern High School as a microcosm of social interaction, where different groups jockey for acceptance and domination in that culture. Dhaenes (2013) writes:

> A key theme of *Glee* is trying to show how subjects with a minority clique identity – which ranges from ethnic identity through sexual identity to the affiliation with a minority clique identity - should be proud of that which makes them different from the mainstream majority. In a way, *Glee* uses the institution of the high school as a metaphor for contemporary Western societies governed by heteronormativity. (p. 312)

As the characters navigate that social world, the fans can watch, critique, comment and reflect on the actions of the characters and the viewers, utilizing those reactions as possible ways to test their own interactions in the real world. Marwick, Gray, and Ananny (2013) found in their research, that participants saw *Glee* as serving two functions: one as a support system for LGBT issues, such

as finding fans and community that were like minded or similar fans that share similar values/norms, and also a "sexual script" or a set of norms for sexual/dating actions and behaviors (p. 17). One participant in a recent Meyer and Wood study said:

 Glee shows all different viewpoints on the issues, so the viewers can relate to different characters in different ways. And then also, you watch how those different views play out on the show and then you can kinda talk about how you feel about that with other fans" (Meyer & Wood, 2013, p. 442).

In the world of fan fiction, *Glee* strikes a chord with the high emotional content and multiple character plot lines; causing their devoted followers, or "Gleeks", to explore the relationships that connect with their lives. The members of the site fanfiction.net post writing that responds to the plot lines, explores different plot options, provides closer examination of character motivation, infusing poetry/music as a response to the show, and sometimes uses the viewer's own experiences with bullying/sexual identity in their writing self-expression. The writing that is posted/published on this site is emotional, critical, and fascinating social commentary; not only demonstrating amazing writing and critique, but exposing the reality of these sensitive issues in connection with the current experience of high school students. Educators can use this media interaction to ease into discussions of challenging issues and "Although some discomfort over change is expected, schools can ease the fear, uncertainty, and misconceptions by using popular cultural texts such as *Glee*" (Falter, 2013-14, p. 295).

Social Justice and Acceptance through Fan Fiction Writing

The heavy fan base response to *Glee,* especially as it relates to the issue of bullying, is overwhelming on digital writing sites such as Fanfiction.net. Fanfiction.net has thousands of posts comprising new scripts, storylines, and plot writings devoted to Glee characters and storylines,

which are updated and contributed to in response to each weekly episode during the series. As a result, this site is a very useful resource for learning the current thinking and actions of young adults on the topic of LGBT bullying. In her article *You're wearing Kurt's necklace: The rhetorical power of Glee in the literacy classroom,* which appeared in the Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, Falter, an English educator, writes "First, *Glee* acts as advocacy for our LGBT teens. School based bullying is increasing, and LGBT teens often bear the brunt of this intimidation" (2013-14, p. 294). As will be discussed in further detail in chapter 2, Falter's work suggests that there is a direct connection between the LGBT plot lines of *Glee* and the social impact that those episodes have on the fan base. The fans who post, elaborate on the storylines, take the characters and push the envelope further, or write creatively about how they would have liked to see the show plots develop. Further, fans of *Glee* fan fiction can critique and review others work, expanding on the quality of writing and development of socially conscious themes. This is not simply a TV show to these young adults, but a source of social commentary spurring mature thoughts and reflection on a major issue in our world today, and its impact on our LGBT teens (Dhaenens, 2012). When exploring the *Glee* connected responses on fanfiction.net, the themes extend past simplistic admiration of beloved character couples, and offers writing that includes social justice topics like violence, date rape, resolution of past wrongs between characters with violent pasts, advocacy in the political world for marginalized groups, equality in treatment (by adults and peers), and drug/alcohol abuse. When the fans connect with a character, for example Kurt, the homosexual male lead, they write fiction that takes him out of the context of the show and into real life scenarios, aging him into adulthood, and surrounding him with social issues that are relevant in today's world: same-sex marriage, children, and privacy/sharing non-heteronormative lifestyles at work. As the storylines in the show explore themes related to

marginalized youth in one of the most heteronormative places in the teenage world, the public high school, the participants respond by infusing plot twists and creative resolutions that may be more closely related to their real-life dreams of acceptance. Dave, the closeted homosexual character that bullied Kurt on the show, is often featured in fan fiction as regretful (By Your Side, Stranger1993 and AbandonedFic, vkdemon), apologetic (A Diva's behavior, Caramel6582), and even ends up with Kurt in various "happily-ever-after-endings" (You Are Enough for Me, Contradcitionseverywhere and Lucky Charming, kelly.rockwell) The fan fiction virtual space is unlimited in scope and availability, giving the opportunity for personal creativity about heated topics, at the same time ensuring privacy for the writer; a low risk opportunity for self-expression even for the most secretive of problems, LGBT bullying. As Elea (2012) writes, "In the virtual world, flexibility and anonymity are possible, which may allow adolescents to feel more comfortable exploring their sexual identity…" (p. 79). The characters in *Glee,* some of the first LGBT roles on a mainstream network show aimed at a teenage audience, inspire the fans to stretch the character experiences far past the scope of the show, and into the world that they may fear for themselves in the future.

Purpose of the Study

One of the possibilities for using digital literacies in the classroom is to use writing websites, more specifically "fan fiction" sites devoted to digital postings about novels, games, TV, or movies, through which members can write, read, or respond to others. These sites "play an increasing role in contemporary youths' literacy development and informal learning experiences" (Black, 2009, p. 76). In this study, the resource is one of the more popular sites, which has postings numbering into the hundreds of thousands. The website www.fanfiction.net combines current media, social commentary, and technology in an original and exciting way for young people to

explore creative writing. Not only do digital literacies, and sites like this, provide opportunities to improve writing across the curriculum (think of fan fiction in response to the *Diary of Anne Frank* to reflect on the events of WWII, or the political ideology of communism in *Animal Farm),* but they also open up new opportunities for communications, through reviewing, posting, and instant messaging with members from around the globe. By offering writing opportunities to a world-wide audience, without leaving the location of the computer screen, students can research and seek out websites, writers, and fans for almost every interest. Fanfiction.net includes categories in anime, manga, books, movies, cartoons, games, comics, TV shows, plays, and musicals, all with hundreds of different categories and offerings of interest to a participant. By tapping into the popular culture through technology and trend specific fan stories, we can offer "a wealth of opportunities for encouraging students to critically engage in broader discussions about the ways that mass media constructs various cultural, gender, and social roles; promote particular representation of the world; and position youth as consumers" (Black 2009, p. 79).

The purpose of this study is to examine adolescent fan fiction participants' interactions in literacy events on www.fanfiction.net around the television program *Glee.* I was interested to see how their writing, reading, and response to writing contributed to their understandings and beliefs about diversity, particularly in relation to LGBT teens and how these developing understandings influenced changes in attitudes or behaviors. This show, with many social justice and LGBT focused themes, has inspired multitudes of posts related to bullying of marginalized youth, and the participants on this site respond and interact on these topics within the fan fiction community, and my research explored how participation in these literacy events, on the fan fiction site, contributed to their understandings and acceptance of diversity.

Research Question

In the world of fan fiction, writers can explore themes and topics that push the boundaries of what might be socially acceptable in the narrow world of high school culture. These teen authors can utilize this safe space, and write poignant, sensitive, and touching stories for an audience, and get back infinite digital reviews and feedback about their writing. *Glee,* with its bullying themes and numerous sexual identity/gender stereotype storylines, fosters writing that covers sensitive topics in fan fiction, and possibly a way for adolescent writers to express their thoughts in this virtual space or experiment with possible exploration, before acting in real life. The digital reviews are varied; posted with emoticons, text speak, bold words, underlines, and can span from emotional support, writing encouragement, to in depth topic/character critique.

In this research, I was interested in exploring how participants of Fanfiction.net use their roles as writers and responders to explore issues of diversity and acceptance in the social context of this online space. In my examination of the *Glee* fan fiction posts and reviews, the following question guided my research.

1. How might the social interactions around the literacy events on fan fiction.net contribute to participant's refinements in understandings, perspectives, actions and tolerance of diversity, particularly as it relates to LGBT teens and bullying, as demonstrated in their original writing as well as in their commentaries and responses to other writers?

CHAPTER 2- REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Over the six years of the series, the television show *Glee* reached unprecedented levels of participation in its fan base, and there are numerous social media options and methods of communicating regarding the characters, plots, and relationships that were featured on the show. The multimedia avenues available to the fans has elevated a one-dimensional show into a varied, diverse community, all responding in various media formats. *Glee* is a "transmedia text," as the show is "supplemented with other media: albums and MP3s of cast recordings, mobile phone ringtones, a concert tour, a reality show called *The Glee Project*, a three-dimensional (3D) movie of the concert tour, and various Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube channels maintained by official sources, cast members and fans" (Marwick, Gray, & Ananny, 2013, p. 3). The millions of writers on fanfiction.net add another media avenue for viewers to explore, create, and discuss the controversial themes and social issues addressed by the program. Participants post their writing devoted to *Glee,* and fans have complete access at any time to read and respond, to these posted writings. This research explored fan fiction writing by addressing the following question:

1. How might the social interactions around the literacy events on fan fiction.net contribute to participant's refinements in understandings, perspectives, actions and tolerance of diversity, particularly as it relates to LGBT teens and bullying, as demonstrated in their original writing as well as in their commentaries and responses to other writers?

This review of literature presents an analysis of published research related to writing and design, new literacies, digital literacies, and a description of the fan fiction writing process. Also, a background of the research involving the fan fiction community and culture will give framing to

the participants and site that this research explored, along with the examination of the television program *Glee*, and the social issue of bullying that the plotlines described.

Virtual Writing is Consistent with Best Practice

Technology has affected how writing is created, published, and accessed by readers. In this section, I will introduce research that has studied the writing process, new literacies, digital literacies, and an example of digital writing in fan fiction. The purpose is to explore how technology has introduced new ways to follow the writing process, through virtual writing and/or reviewing, and the attraction that it holds for students of the digital generation. To conclude this section, I will introduce an example of digital literacies, virtual fan fiction, which I examined in this study.

Writing process research indicates that virtual writing follows best practice.

As Atwell (1984) wrote, "a literate environment is wherever written language is the natural domain of the children and adults who work and play there." Although the effect that the internet would have on writing would have been too far in the future to predict during Atwell's research at that time, the virtual online space utilized in digital literacies has opened a new world for collaborative practice and co-writing among participants from around the world. Digital literacies offer instant access and opportunity for an important and high interest aspect of the writing process: feedback and response. When participants publish or "post" their writing in an online space, their work invokes response continuously, for any reader that explores that site at any time. Best practice writing classrooms have put emphasis on this crucial step of the writing process, the peer-to peer and peer- to-teacher response to the writing for further review and discussion. In *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*, Liner, Kirby, and Kirby (2003) add weight to that aspect of the writing process when they wrote "…learners and writers needed to construct personal versions of

the world around them, but then they also needed to submit those unique versions to peers for response, negotiation, and confirmation" (p. 4). The back-and-forth aspect of the peer/teacher response, as the writing process evolves, creates a deeper understanding about the "how" of writing, the creation, the struggle, and the constant flow of revision that is best practice in the writing classroom. Students become better writers by observing and participating in the evolution of their work and working with other writers that are engrained in the process, as opposed to a letter grade given after drafts are submitted. Flower and Hayes (1981) mentioned the "messy reality" of the writing process, where planning, writing, and revising often repeat, overlap, and coincide, as opposed to the paradigm of that time, which was a "stage process model" that some educators interpreted as clear cut stages, which would happen sequentially. In 2004, Donald Graves echoed that his own writing texts had been misinterpreted by educators that he had observed, who would ask each other if they implemented the "five step" or "seven step" "Graves" model. Graves expressed his frustration regarding English educators that had broken his ideas into a "Monday– brainstorm, Tuesday- draft, Wednesday- edit, Thursday– revise, Friday-final copy and share" lesson planning methodology instead of the "very messy operation" (p. 90) that is more reflective of the writing process. Graves also suggests using the term "craft" instead of writing process, since it "suggests a rough shaping, moving towards a greater refinement" (p. 90), a term which may be reflective of Donald Murray's earlier work (1996) *Crafting a Life: in essay, story, poem.*

Nancie Atwell (1984) emphasized that the best writing classes are transparent about the process of writing, students and teachers alike, as focused writers involved in a classroom writing workshop, saying "It is as participants in the processes of reading and writing that students-and teachers- become insiders. We become participants when we open up our classrooms and establish

workshops where kids and teachers write, read and talk about writing and reading" (p. 240). By utilizing a digital space for writing, such as the fan fiction sites, the community of writers deeply enmeshed in the writing process is endless in number, with their drafts, edits, commentary, and responses transparently posted for all to observe and support. In the digital age, finding a writing community has become easier, with the twenty-four-hour access and infinite number of writing participants online. In 1996, Murray spoke of the difficulty in finding the right peers to share writing with, saying "Writing is a private act with a public result, and most of us need a writing community that both provides companionship in our solitude and a staging area that will ease us into publication before strangers" (p. 123). However, virtual publishing now gives a constant "staging area," with the anonymity of the internet lowering the risk of rejection or harsh critique. This virtual writing workshop unites writers from across the globe, to comment, support, create, and publish anytime or anyplace. This peer interaction is directly reflective of Vygotsky's (ZPD) zone of proximal development, where learning and development occur when interacting in their environment and in concert with his or her peers (1978). The rapid response and interaction through the ease of an internet site also connects directly with best practice writing instruction. The continuous support, critique and discussion on this site keeps participants engaged in dialogue about writing and their own artistic creations. One of the disconnects in the more traditional writing classroom, where only the teacher provides feedback, is the timeliness of the responses in connection with the writing process for the student. Feedback, ideally, should be quick and responsive to not only writing mechanics, but about the piece as a whole. Liner writes, "Real responding differs from evaluation because it is personal and shared. It is here and now feedback. It is not a list of things the writer should do next time, but an immediate response to what the writer is saying now" (Liner et al, 2003, p. 104). That immediacy, provided by the virtual benefits in the

world of fan fiction, heightens the engagement of the participant writer, which may answer the question of why teen writers, reluctant in the classroom, will post lengthy and continuous pieces of writing, with many revisions and drafts, even as they resist such practices in the traditional English classroom. This research explored this virtual fan fiction writing, examining the process, interaction, and motivations of the writer, as well as the virtual writing community supports.

New literacies research has expanded what "writing" can look like.

The virtual space has gained immense popularity for social interaction, but has also made ground breaking shifts in the way people engage in literacy practices. Writing online, through instant message, email, social media platforms, and texts has caused much debate among scholars regarding the legitimacy of these new forms of writing/communication. When considering the current theories of literacy, the multiliteracies movement within English education directly addresses non-traditional writing. The New London Group, a committee of educators that first met in September of 1994 to debate literacy pedagogy, the changes in technology, communication, and workplace written communication expectations that would affect writing instruction, produced from respected educators such as Gee, Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, and others, a seminal work "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures" (1996). This work regarded the social future of English education and how the definition of literacy needed to be greatly widened. Their discussions suggested the use of the term "design," instead of writing, to embrace the multi modal uses of communication. The term "multiliteracies" (1996) used in this way, encapsulated not only the multiplicity of communication channels, but the diversity of culture and language within the field of English education. Scaffolding from the theory of multiliteracies, new research about classroom applications such as drawing, texting, email, and online chat has enlarged the scope of what constitutes literacy, language, and writing.

Researchers like Kirkland (2009), Whitin (2005), and Smagorinsky (2001) connected with the multiliteracies movement began to include and investigate visual arts, drama, and online writing as forms of literacy. Kirkland looked at tattoos as visual representation of his case subject's (Derrick) culture, identity, and personal life story. Derrick's practice of getting "tatted up" as a story-telling literacy event, demonstrated more than understanding of a text, but a manipulation of textual images to represent meaning and an identity/definition of self. Whitin (2005), also used this concept of visual literacy practices in her "sketch to stretch" research working with elementary students. Referring to the concept of multiliteracies, her classroom application had students draw in reflection of their classroom reading and then vocalize their use of shape, line, and color connections to the text. These metaphorical representations of the students, once discussed with the teacher and other students enriched their understanding of the textual literature in the classroom. Smagorinsky (2001), reflected on such student centered learning practices, asserting that reading is enculturated and socially constructed, so that there cannot be a teacher controlled literacy practice, or an "official" interpretation of textual meanings. His practice of using "body biographies", a technique where students draw images and add text to life size body outlines, which then represents their understanding of specific literature characters, embodies both Whitin's sketch techniques, with Kirkland's cultural reflections of visual storytelling. This out-of-the-box thinking about what writing is and what it could be, especially with the advent of virtual technology, has changed what constitutes writing and the writing process as well as how educators instruct writing in the classroom.

These examples of "new literacies" as discussed by the New London group, demonstrate the extension of communicative forms of expression and how broad the area of writing or design has become. Extending into the world of technology and the digital literacy genre of

multiliteracies, new aspects of "design" widen the world of writing further. Writers can utilize virtual peers to write through IM (instant message), text messages, email, or by using chat room sites, and publish for reviewer response 24 hours a day. Writers utilize formats like blogging and virtual role play writing, along with a host of visual formats to make movies and images, and can post to YouTube or Vine, the 5 to 6 second video sharing service, for instant feedback. This high interest virtual space is very appealing to teenagers, and educators must realize that adolescents, who often value the social over the academic, may belong to a Discourse (Gee, 2001) or culture that differs from what is emphasized in traditional public schools. Gee describes a Discourse as a socially accepted way of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or (Gee, 1999). Gee also felt that one could belong to many Discourses; for example, a parental Discourse, a teacher Discourse, and a Hispanic Discourse, with their own vocabularies, dialects, slang terms, and speech patterns as well as ways of being and acting in the world. Just as one might speak in a different manner to a boss, than to their child, one might also speak differently when addressing people of different social locations. These "Discourses" discussed by Gee are further evidence that people exist in multiple social locations at once, and even have different language and word usage to support them. Weber defines a "social location" as "an individual's or a group's social place in the race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies, as well as in other critical social hierarchies such as age ethnicity, and nation" (2001). One of the numerous ways one could belong to a different Discourse or social location might be through participation in an online community like a fan fiction site. One of the intents of this study is to provide educators, including classroom teachers, with a deeper understanding of how adolescents are engaging in the virtual world; particularly how

they are interacting with Fanfiction.net to address issues of teen bullying as they are played out in the television show *Glee.*

Research indicates that digital literacies are appealing to students and improve literacy.

The future of multimodal literacy practices draws heavily upon the Internet and social media platforms. The Internet has such a vast amount of opportunity of reading and writing, and although the research is still in infancy, the use of online diaries (Guzetti & Gamboa, 2005) and fan fiction (Black, 2005 and 2009), could have an enormous impact on how classrooms can utilize this new technology for English education. Using this "third space" (Kirkland, 2009), students could find a safe place for writing practice, and room for interpreting literature through forging their own identities. Gee (2004) also explored the virtual informal learning spaces or "affinity spaces" to examine why students are more motivated and have higher participation when they utilize virtual spaces for writing. He concluded that the "third" space bridged differences between gender, class, race, age, and culture, and offered various levels of participation through reading, writing, and co-creation. Kirkland's research with subjects that created online personas with opposing gender or cultural identification demonstrated that the subject's "digital worlds not only transacted with their physical worlds, but they became a substance of their own, situated 'between' and 'in place' of them" (p. 18). This third space or virtual world was used for self-expression, communication, friendship, and fantasy, with the world of internet social media creating a world of high interest literacy opportunity for adolescents.

When the future of the English classroom is considered, the new technological advances of the 21st century have greatly changed the concepts of literacy, connecting with the multimodal methods of literacy considered by the New London Group and the Conference of English

Education (CEE) 2005 summit. Diversity in our culture, educational tools, and way of expression/communication (New London Group, 1996) has direct implications on education and must be incorporated into the English teacher's pedagogy. No longer can there be one "true" interpretation of text, along with a conventional textual response as the privileged academic answer. To tap into the reflective nature of our cultures through nontraditional literary events, virtual spaces, and collaborative sketching is to broaden our repertoire of methods to connect students with English. As researchers move forward in studying the purpose of future literacy education, the subject of English education and teaching has broadened immensely, embracing what students may need to become successful adults and even redefining the "mission" of education writing that "its fundamental purpose is to ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community, creative, and economic life" (New London Group, 2000, p. 9). With the study of multiliteracies and virtual online options for classroom application, there is an endless scope for new research to utilize these as best practice for the classroom. The ease of collaborative writing in virtual spaces, inside and outside of the brick and mortar school environment, will expand the opportunity for students and teachers to participate in the writing process.

From the teachers of English, who often treat technology as a supplemental tool to writing, more like a typewriter than a multimodal use for literacy creation (Yeo, 2007) to the students themselves, who feel that the material they create electronically is not "real" writing (PEW 2008) there needs to be a shift in thinking or understanding regarding technological impacts on writing. Just to place computers in the classrooms does not change the pedagogy of the educators (Windschitl & Sahl, 2002), and the field as a whole needs to embrace this new way of "designing" literacies. Roozen's (2009) subject was often given her writing for classes back, told that it was

too "cyber punk" to be academic, although the sample published was rich with description and creativity. Our students on the other hand, are more technologically savvy than their teachers, who may not have grown up with the age of modern internet access. New English educators and English teachers need more research for technology applications to create beneficial experiences for their students (Young & Bush 2004). Lankshear and Knobel have raised that call for new research, introducing the stereotypical textual approach as "letteracy" not the multimodal literacy that can be utilized with the technological advances currently held. This new literacy has many differences with letteracy, including collaboration of independent writing, finding relationships as opposed to information regurgitation, and evolution over fixity (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). To believe it is not a "real" form of writing, is merely a defensive tact for those who fear that the traditional canon may be replaced, instead of an opportunity to enrich the expression of students. Multiliteracies and Digital Literacies are not a threat to traditional English educational methods, and it is not a just a new way to make meaning, but a new kind of meaning altogether. (Hull & Nelson, 2005).

Digital literacies are directly linked to the future of English education due to the constantly changing aspects of new technology, the motivation and high interest of technology for students, and the collaborative aspect of working with the technology as Designers of English. Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, and Cammack (2004) used the term "deictic" to describe this new literacy, that the technological aspects of literacy change so often, even the research date must be considered, since at the time of the writing, the technology may be different than at the publishing moment. Due to this fast pace of digital creation, the future of English education, or the ability that will be valued as cultural capital may be the speed and ability to gain and communicate information (Leu & Kinzer, 2000). The students connect with these digital literacies and are highly motivated to use

them. Since communicating using the internet is already present in students' lives as a social connection, social use gives students' powerful motivation to learn new technology, and becoming literate in this new genre can then be applied to academics (Alvermann, 2008). A 2009 study of adolescents (Luckin et al.) showed that 80% of teens used social networking sites and over 90% used email for communication. In reality, the classroom is one of the few places that we discourage the use of digital communication (Luke, 2003), even though students today have grown up using the internet and technology to communicate. Merchant (2001) looked at chat room usage by teenage female students (the study of chat rooms exemplifying the deictic nature for this research) and although there was a general disdain for grammar, punctuation, and full expanded writing, the multimodal usage of music and video clips, connection to websites, and ability to chat, IM, and surf the net at the same time identified technological skills that would be marketable in the future.

One specific use of digital literacies among the social networking, texting, and researching possibilities, is the use of technology and the Internet for writing. With rising popularity, online diaries/journals relay novels, and fan fiction have opened up new opportunities for writing. The popularity of this digital form of writing is the discovery of a worldwide audience, for collaboration, editing, and social purposes, giving the feeling of publishing to the burgeoning writers around the globe.

Yi's (2008) research of a Korean online community demonstrated these benefits to writing; the subjects felt that the connection of the virtual community encouraged their digital writing, and the collaborative nature of the relay novels helped to enrich their ELL experience with the second language in a safe place. This social aspect to the digital writing was also explored by Guzzetti and Gamboa (2005), where the subjects used online journaling which was open for the virtual community to view and comment. Their conclusion was that having an authentic audience

gave the writers a purpose, and the writing developed skills that could be used effectively in the future work field. This virtual audience is fully interactive, adding to the participants' experience, for example, www.fanfiction.net, one of the largest online fan fiction archives was the subject of an article in 2012 and the author felt "that the site's content is intended to encourage meaningful participation and interaction, and various administrative functions on the site are interactive as well (Jwa, p. 326). This social aspect of digital literacy participation and finding information regarding the possible supports or benefits it may give participants in the fan fiction genre was my focus for this research.

Fan fiction writing research supports its relevancy and consistency with best practice.

Fan fiction is "fiction that utilizes pre-existing characters and settings from a literary or media text," (Tosenberger, 2008, p. 135) and the writers of fan fiction take characters and situations from existing television shows, books, videogames, and movies and actively transform this material into original fiction or artwork (Berkowicz, 2012, p.198). This genre is now embracing the digital space, adding virtual publishing to their works, so that similar fans can share their work with a vast audience. In one case study Roozen (2009) examined writing from her subject's high school education through graduate study, trying to find the link from the fan fiction writing to English academic writing in school. Kate, the subject, connected Plato's works with characters from her fan fiction novels, and generally made connections between her in school and out of school writing. This bridge from digital to classic texts could put to rest the idea that the technology will replace the traditional literature canon, but could instead create connections and one could utilize both genres. (Leu & Kinzer, 2000).

Lewis and Chandler-Olcott (2009) also worked with fan fiction, looking at younger female students writing about anime on the "Fanmania" website. They found the writing to be

multimodal, using color, images, music links, as well as text to "Design." The use of photos, hyperlinks, videos, and artistic images, bring new dimension to the fan fiction texts, all interwoven by using "an array of dynamic digital resources composed of shifting formats and contents" (Jwa, 2012, p.326). The two subjects in the Lewis and Chandler-Olcott case shared tips in designing their texts with others, and thanked other collaborators for their assistance in producing their works. Communication with other fan fiction writers was essential to their production of work, using email lists and with one subject even designing a website to assist other writers. This aspect of collaboration appears to be a common theme in the fan fiction research.

A fan fiction study that included both genders was done by Black (2009), with three ELL students from different countries. The writing produced on the fan fiction site had manga/anime threads, and the writers often collaborated, even though on opposite ends of the globe, through the use of IM (instant message). Whether the collaboration is virtual or face to face, this engagement demonstrates a deeper understanding and reflection on the writing quality (Doerr-Stevens, 2011). This collaboration in writing, or idea sharing, also reflected in the Lewis and Chandler-Olcott study, is a drastic difference from our independent creations in traditional academic writing. The Designing in this study appeared to be sequential, with chapters published one at a time, with pleas for reviewing and feedback. This support through the form of feedback assisted in motivating students to write, even in their second language, in this virtual space.

The fan fiction sites provide vast opportunity for interaction with literacy; Jwa (2012) wrote that "Users of the site can position themselves as legitimate participants in many ways: as writer, reader, discussant, and critic" (p. 326). English educators must consider the enormity of sociocultural exposure that collaborative writing with fans from around the world, and how that may affect the Designing of the future. Instead of having an audience of one, the teacher,

publishing in this vein opens up to a larger social community, and the understanding of that audience (especially a fellow fan) takes on great importance (Sweeney, 2010). That audience feedback becomes motivation for more participation as "…fan fiction readers easily become fan fiction writers and find not only generalized encouragement, but an entire community eager to read their efforts and to help develop their own voices" (Tosenberger, 2014, p. 22). The fan fiction genre, utilizing the vehicle of the digital sites, is reflective of current best practice writing process with the peer editing, response, collaboration, revision and publishing options that the internet provides. The fundamentals of writing process (Graves, 2004) encourage student choice in writing, regular responses from peers, frequency in writing (4-5 times a week), the need for publishing, thinking aloud during the process (for fan fiction, this is done in the comments and framing of the writing), and maintaining collections of a writer's work, which in the fan fiction world is housed online. The enormity of possible input, connections, relationships, and responses within the writing, reviewing and posting on the fan fiction site, and what effect it may have on the participants is what will be explored in my research questions.

Fan Fiction Participants are a Community with its own Culture

This section of the literature review will introduce the world of fan fiction, including details about the website, participants, acceptable behaviors, and how users utilize the site for their virtual writing and publishing. This culture has specific "norms' for participating, and a heavily contextual language for communication, that has been explored in current research. These cultural expectations for participation shape the support and feedback that the participants seek, and develop the relationships between writers and reviewers in this virtual space.

Fan fiction participants have their own norms and behavior.

McCurdy, Spradley, and Shandy define culture as "Knowledge that is learned and shared and that people use to generate behavior and interpret experience" (2005, p. 5). The key attributes associated with a defined "culture" is that it is learned, shared, generates behavior, and interprets experience. From the research that I have conducted during my coursework and study, the fan fiction community meets every aspect of this criterion. Participants in fan fiction communities learn the site and the genre of writing from their peers, by reading, instant messaging, and writing. This knowledge is acquired by trial and error, reader/community response, and through interactions with peers on the site, who are members of the culture. Various research studies using various forms of data (e.g., focus group interviews, individual interviews, and collection of reviews and posts) indicate that there is a shared vocabulary, genre style, and writing collaboration that validates a claim that fan fiction communities share social knowledge. Regardless of the virtual aspect of the communication in this community, "…it is necessary to rethink the idea that cyberspace is a disembodied space, since the lived experience in virtual worlds becomes an embodied phenomenological experience" (Thomas, 2009, p.185).

The first and most prevalent evidence of this would be the fan fiction genre, which is shared by the members of the community. The definition of fan fiction "refers to the practice in which fans of a given media object write their own stories within the same universe, using either the characters found in the original media, or characters they create themselves". (Lawrence, 2011, p. 31) Each of these passionate fans share intimate, detailed knowledge about the subject that they write about, whether it be "Twilight," "Glee," or "Divergent." as Tosenberger illustrates in her research of fan fiction (2008). Her research explored the writers of "slash" or homoerotic fan fiction targeted to Harry Potter fans. This altering of the original text pairings in the original book has become extraordinarily popular, regardless of the deviation from the canon. Instead,

the undercurrents and analysis of the fans, picking up on subtle indications of the reader, become a jumping off point for writing exploration. This writing embodies the deep exploration and knowledge of the original text, so as to bridge the gap realistically, even among fellow dedicated fans, into the new storylines. Tosenburger writes that "Fan writers are often characterized as refusing merely to consume media, but rather to engage actively with texts; fandom as a space of engagement is especially valuable to young fans…" (p. 185). These writers push the limits of the characters, among a community of fans, and actively change the direction of the original storylines and pairings, giving an openness that embraces imagination, personal thought, and experimentation which appeals to LGBT fans of many genres. *Glee*, with main characters pushing the boundaries of gender and sexuality stereotypes, and homosexual relationship pairings, appeals to LGBT fan fiction participants, and the active reviews, supports and responses of those fans, were examined in this research.

Fan fiction reviews/feedback follows cultural norms for support.

The virtual fan fiction site itself designs behavior (IM usage for writing collaboration, using emoticons for commentary), but the community generates behavior norms and values of their own. For example, as a whole, the posts (all that are documented/time stamped, and archived on the site itself) all take a positive and supportive method of responding to one another's writing. There is even a term for fan fiction members who write negative commentary about others writing, they are called "flamers". The website Fanfiction.net defines a "flamer" as "A term used to describe someone who enjoys commenting or reviewing a person's story harshly, only pointing out the faults, often using heavy sarcasm. The comment or review left by such a person is known as a 'flame'"(https://www.fanfiction.net/topic/74868/38673819/A-Fanfic-Glossary, retrieved 11/19/2013). This behavior is also addressed in the fanfiction.net guidelines/policies, where

members are advised to not post "harassing" or "abusive" content, which may be removed by the site owners. Instead, there is a focus on this fan fiction site giving the opportunity for an open place for creativity among fellow fan fiction writers, with supportive critiques, free from "flamers" and negative, insulting critique (Black, 2005).

This positive feedback has then generated author behavior from the members, who ask for commentary after every chapter, respond supportively to peer posts, and have the opinion that the review posts show how "good" their stories are. The fan fiction writers have generated behavior to earn more and more reviews, such as serial writing, personal requests for feedback, designing titles and summaries that will catch the eyes of readers for more reviews. Black (2005) found that authors post solely to get that review feedback, and more encouragement towards their writing. This creates a community of readers and writers that create a cyclical writing process with a positive focus, where the unspoken rule is one of mutual encouraging reviews. In one of Black's later studies, one of her fan fiction writers articulate that the positive reviews encourage her to keep writing, saying "the really sweet ones are actually the ones that inspire me the most. Every time I read them, I feel all fuzzy and happy inside. It gives me a purpose, a reason for my writing" (2006, p. 124). Jwa (2012) echoes the emphasis on the interpersonal commentary; "The fact that fan fiction writing is presented in such a way as to gratify not only oneself but also readers suggests a writer that is taking steps towards fulfilling social needs (p. 332). This leads to the fan fiction practice of requesting reviews frequently during the writing process, even at the end of unfinished chapters, for further motivation while writing (Black, 2006, p. 125).

The fan fiction behavior that places an emphasis on positive reviews, then affects how their experience is interpreted. For example, in a more traditional writing class or group, harsh critique, or at least detail writing commentary on grammar, metaphor, technique would be valued and

considered. In the fan fiction culture, "flamers" are widely panned, even having other peers verbally "bash" those who dare put a less than positive review on a fan fiction post. There are virtual forums on the website to learn how to respond to "flamers" and the comments are termed as "bullying". Something that would be the norm in an academic classroom, like a spelling or grammar check, is not a relevant or considered issue in the fan fiction community. The only area that can be critiqued without quick defense from several members would be correction on the fan genre details. If a fan notices a deviation from the original work (locations, plot points, character actions), that is a critique that does cause more intellectual debate and consideration, as fans review whether the plot deviation remains true to the media subject of the fan fiction. The detail oriented, deeply focused nature of fan fiction writing, which is all-consumed by the devotion to the media source, leads to the tight-knit nature of the fan community. Some fan fiction writings are so enmeshed in the dialogue and references of the subject that it is "practically incomprehensible to those who don't share the exactly the same set of references" (Tosenberger, 2014, p. 5). As personal critique is discouraged and positive reviews and commentary are welcomed in this fan community space, the effect of supports and feelings of acceptance among fan fiction writers was explored in this study.

Fan Fiction Writing can be Socio-Identity Practice

In this section, I will be delving into research connected to the various ways that fans utilize the fan fiction site and their interactions with the fan fiction community. The LGBT stories written by fans on this site extends beyond the boundaries of what is typically expressed in media, and I will present the research that explores what may motivate fans to participate, and /or how the participation may affect them. Immediately following, I will present studies that indicate that the online writing may be "practice" or exploration of a fan's identity, and how that may affect their

off screen lives. To conclude, I also wish to demonstrate that bullying is a significant issue in schools and students' lives today, and how the impact of the television show *Glee* has had a wide-spread impact in the media world today.

LGBT fan fiction writers use fan fiction for socio-identity practice.

When Fan fiction writers explore their characters and plotlines, they may vary widely from the original canon of the media. This exploration may be a creative outlet, or a more direct social experiment in this virtual space, as a way to push the boundaries of social conventions in connection with sexual or gender stereotypes. This writing in a virtual space with social interaction creates an opportunity to participate in a social action and present as a person with an alternative lifestyle or outside the norms of typical sexual stereotypes. Tosenberger (2008) writes that "One avenue that has yet to be explored, with specific regard to adolescent fans, is the potential to encounter and experiment with alternative modes of sexual discourse, particularly queer discourse" (p. 186), and the utilization of fan fiction, with media that has prevalent LGTB storylines and characters, gives a "safe" space for this experimental identity creation with response from an empathetic social community. Berg (2013) even suggests that people may "benefit from constructing an online identity of a gay male, transgender person, or any identity that they do not practice in the lived world," (p.35) as the responses from the third space community may positively surprise the virtual participant. Fan fiction writers and readers often respond to sensitive issues in their reviews, with socio-emotional support and advice. This role play, or identity creation, can be connected with social development in the adolescent. Just as children play that they are adults, to explore behavior, the participants in fan fiction write their characters in adult situations, aging the characters into real life behaviors that they need to explore and examine for their future actions. One might even make the extension that the negative reality that LGBT fans may feel inspires their

identity play, similar to the example given by Vygotsky, in *Mind in Society* (1978), "Play behavior in real life is normally seen only in the type of game when children begin to play at what they are in fact doing, evidently creating associations that facilitate the execution of an unpleasant action" (p. 102). Just as a child may pretend to get a shot at the doctor, fans may write characters that get bullied, discriminated against, or assaulted, to try and learn and understand those negative actions. In Tosenberger's 2014 research, she speaks regarding the active participation of fan fiction participants from the more "fringe" populations, writing "…it is not surprising that transformational fandom is often populated by those who are considered marginal audiences, who are more likely to feel a need to rework a beloved story to suit their own desires" (p. 8). When these fan fiction writers compare the media they enjoy, they may naturally want to connect it more directly with their own experience, and write plot points and characters that reflect their own experiences. As *Glee*'s fan fiction audience respond frequently and in great numbers to the LGBT storylines on the fan fiction site, expanding on their pairings and extending into the future developing plots that include same-sex marriage and children, this research reflects on the possibilities that participants may possibly be testing out events in their own lives that they are considering for positive response from the virtual community.

Fan fiction is virtual socio-identity "rehearsal".

Writing in the virtual space, in an interactive writing community, allows the writer to have connections with an audience of like-minded peers, who give continuous validation and support as a fellow writer and as the created online identity. Barton and Hamilton (2000) write that digital online practices "connect people with one another, and they include shared cognitions represented in ideologies and social identities" (p.8). Through these connections, writers can then experiment with storylines and plots that echo issues in their personal lives or create identity characteristics in

their online persona that they covet in their real lives and receive support and feedback from the virtual community. Jwa found that "While engaged in intertextual discourse, the writers' values, preferences, and beliefs are selectively expressed in parallel with what they value in the original discourse. Intertextuality in fan fiction discourse encourages and even reconstructs the writer's voice, as his or her identity is inevitably reflected and negotiated in fan fiction writing when he or she positions him or herself in the original discourse," (2012, p. 330) so this writing becomes a virtual rehearsal as the participants' experiment with their identity.

Rebecca Black's research (2005) with fan fiction writers that are English Language Learners, she found that the writers created fictions that were outside of the anime series on the fan fiction site, and the plot lines started reflecting serious social issues and having the characters work through the complex feelings and actions related to current teenage lives. Black writes that:

> Through these hybrid characters, fanfiction authors are able to use literacy skills to articulate and to publicly enact concerns from their daily lives. …when authors perform distress through their fictions, such as intimating suicide, they often receive an outpouring of community support (through reviews, email, and instant messenger services). These hybrid texts represent communicative events, situated in specific contexts, that are intended for an audience of peer readers who have similar interests and may share many of the same concerns. (Black, 2005, p. 124)

In this particular study, as the writers wrote about serious conflicts and social issues *as their characters*, they still received communication through reviews and digital writing that was positive and supportive. The support was empathetic and specific, with fellow fan fiction readers even "sharing relevant personal narratives from their own lives" (Black 2005). These communities within fan fiction commonly interact with Instant Messaging, email, and review posts and bond more closely over their shared appreciation for a certain media genre and/or character. These connections among the fans can even become more varied, as fans of certain plot points or characters then connect in sub-fan groups. The fan fiction becomes more than a place were writing

is posted, and instead becomes a network of social connections, connected to certain interests and subcultures for community and social support (Thomas, 2011, p. 6).

Another study, in 2006, echoed similar findings with writers on the site "livejournal", another virtual writing site that gives fans an outlet for writing where they write as characters in the media vein (i.e., anime, movies, books) that that interests them, allowing other fans to read and interact with them as other avatars/characters. Thomas (2006) reflected that the subjects used the writing to explore boundaries that they had not crossed in real life, and vent their innermost frustrations and feelings that they were currently experiencing. The fan fiction writers could "work through their adolescent angst using their fictional characters as a safe means for both confronting and distancing themselves from painful experiences" (p. 136). By writing sensitive plot lines and emotional stories for her character/avatar, her subject was able to "practice" different actions in a "safe" space, which then affected how she behaved in the real world. Her character "Jandalf", was involved, through the online writing, in a romantic relationship, that the author has not personally experienced, which Thomas (2006, p. 162) says "in fact is a rehearsal of the desires of the real Jandalf as she imagines she can be." "Jandalf" even articulates how her fan fiction writing and virtual "rehearsal' of events has changed her own personality and actions; she claimed "'I've found that since I've been using her as one of my main characters, I have been…well…rubbing off on myself in a way. I'm more outgoing than I used to be, and Jandalf's creation and use does figure in that'" (Thomas, 2006, p.161).   This is a significant escalation from the concept that virtual writing helps make social connections, to this research which suggests that virtual fan fiction writing changes the writer's behavior and empowers their actions in their real lives.

One of the hot button media topics in the public school system today, bullying, is "typically defined as altercations among children or adults ranging from name-calling to instances of extreme

emotional or physical violence" (Lewison & Heffernan, 2008 p. 44). As educators, we are looking to find ways to teach our students to advocate for themselves and others, and examine challenging social situations so as to navigate the interactions that they may face as adults. One way to facilitate that knowledge is to write, especially with a focus on social issues, so that writers can start to understand emotions with reflective critical thinking about behavior and human reactions (Mack, 2012). As educators introduce social issues as topics and encourage writing to express feelings about identity and social location in the writer's lives, there is an impact not only on the support and positive effects on the student current lives, but also the future behavior of our youth, and how they may interact with others as adults. In the Lewison and Hefferman study (2008), the student subjects read and wrote regarding bullying and social justice, so that the students could reflect on character behavior and how they might agree or challenge the actions that they read about in the texts. Even with these younger subjects, in elementary school, the reading of these "disruptive texts" (p. 461) that included sensitive social issues regarding gender, class, and race/culture, the discussions were fruitful, inspiring debate and discussion in their writing workshops. These students were able to "safely make visible a variety of social ideologies about themselves and the *other* within the institution of their school" (Lewison & Hefferman, 2008, p.461). For *Glee* fan fiction participants, examined in this research, I looked at the fan fiction related to bullying and social justice issues, and the writing done in the possible "safe" space in the community, to see what advances in thinking and understanding occur for the participants.

Fiction writing also can act as a conduit for self-advocacy for the writer in various social situations. Writers often create characters that are hybrids of their own persona, and also infusing their characters with the traits they admire, so as to experiment with possible behavior and actions that they could enact in real life situations (Black, 2005). By creating these hybridized identities

in their characters, they can then role play and begin to rehearse navigation through issues, feelings, and insecurities that they are facing in their personal situations. These "fictional characters are also a means for the girls to fashion new and emerging identities for themselves as they develop into adulthood…Their characters are a rehearsal of who they want to become, and in role playing that ideal self, they can grow closer to becoming that ideal" (Thomas, 2006, p. 160).

Bullying is a Serious Social Problem

The media attention on the public school system in recent years is concentrated on the hot-button topic of bullying in schools. The highly publicized school shootings at Columbine High School in 1999 and the 2010 suicide of Tyler Clementi, the 18 yr. old Rutgers freshman that committed suicide after being publically "outed" by his roommate, makes direct connection between bullying and violent actions that result in teen deaths. As the public school systems, parents, and students struggle with programs, support groups, and laws/actions to prevent bullying activity, delving into the root causes of the behavior and acceptance of marginalized youth may be the only realistic method of reducing bullying actions. Bullying can be embodied in many communications and actions, but "is characterized as a specific type of aggressive behavior that is unprovoked and intended to harm or disturb. This behavior occurs repeatedly over time and there is an imbalance of power, with a more powerful person attacking a less powerful one" (E.D. Berlan et al, 2010, p. 367). This "power imbalance between victims and perpetrators" (Cordi & Masturzo, 2013) can result in behavior that can range from "name-calling to instances of extreme emotional or physical violence" (Lewison and Hefferman, 2008, p. 440).

The public school system has been under intense scrutiny regarding the pervasive nature of bullying among the student body, with much research and study regarding what actions school administration should take to resolve the issue. Data has "repeatedly linked bullying victimization

with an increased risk of suicidal ideation and action in elementary, middle, and high school students. This has led researchers to label bullying as a risk factor for suicidality- one that remains even after controlling for other risk factors such as depression, sex, socioeconomic status, and family structure" (Connolly, 2012, p.252). While the violent events resulting in the injury and death of students demonstrates the significant need for research and support in this area, there are also vast, less detectable effects on the students who are victims of bullying. Affecting grades, attendance, and dropout rates, bullying has dramatic consequences on student achievement, "with ninety percent of victims experiencing a drop in grades "(Connolly, 2012, p. 2).

When addressing the issue of bullying, research has explored the victims of bullying, and there is much evidence that the number of LGBT youth experiences with bullying are disproportionally larger. Even in random sample studies "…youth who self-identify as gay and adolescents with same –sex romantic attractions, compared with their heterosexual peers, have reported higher levels of physical victimization" (Friedman, Koeske, Silvestre, Korr, & Sites, 2006, p. 623). Victims of bullying are often those who are thought of as "different" and those who "exhibit GRNB (Gender-role nonconforming behavior) may be perceived as abnormal" (Friedman et al, 2006, p. 621). Another study found that "Students who were questioning their sexual orientation reported the most bullying, the most homophobic victimization, the most drug use, the most feelings of depression and suicidality, and more truancy than either heterosexual or LGB students" (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009, p. 989).

That LGBT teens are often bullying victims is not new information, but "experts report that it appears to be increasing in prevalence and severity, and involves more vicious behaviors and deadlier outcomes than in previous years," (Russell, Ryan, Toomy, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011, p. 227) which can be connected with the heteronormative nature of the public high school culture in

America. This "jock culture" creates a gender pecking order during the transformative adolescent years, as students explore their adult selves. This can create a culture where any male perceived as feminine can be perceived as a potential threat to their own masculinity, and females that behave in a non-gender stereotypical manner may be a victim of teasing and attack (McKinney & VanWormer, 2003). Connolly (2012) claims that "at least one commentator has labeled high school 'one of the most intensely and often violently anti-gay sites in our culture", and the bullying frequency in connection with LGBT supports this viewpoint.

School systems are being called upon to socially educate their students, and promote tolerance and an appreciation for diversity, so as to offset the instances of bullying and negativity in the school experience for LGBT youth. Russell (2011) writes that it should be an "educational and public health priority" (p.229) and that school climate for LGBT students has a significant impact on their future success. Friedman (2006) says that "…schools should incorporate issues of sexual orientation into anti-bullying programs, provide non-judgmental support for gay youth who are bullied, and develop school policies specifically prohibiting harassment based on sexual orientation" (p. 623). But will the concentration on LGBT youth help all students? A 2009 study (Birkett et al) affirms that a positive school climate where teasing and bullying that takes on a homophobic tone is not allowed "can improve the psychological outcomes for all students and not just those who are LGBT or questioning" (p. 999). This seriousness of the effects of bullying on students, the disproportionate numbers of LGBT youth that are victims of bullying, and the numerous studies calling for the teaching of acceptance to begin altering our school climates and the rejection of the heteronormative behaviors in our students lives indicates that schools must begin directly addressing these social issues in the classroom. The TV program *Glee* has plotlines that directly reflect the heteronormative nature of a public high school, and how the marginalized

characters are affected by the prejudices and biases of the majority. Bullying is a major theme of the show, and how students participate or behave as bystanders, especially in cases of LGBT aggression. The fan fiction writing in this proposed research is in response to these themes and could be an indicator of how participants identify with these issues or experience them in their own lives. The virtual world of social media could empower marginalized youth and allow them a space where the digital community could provide support and empowerment.

The digital world is a source of empowerment.

The digital world has expanded at a pace that is difficult for research to maintain current knowledge about. An entire virtual dimension has altered communication, relationships, and information access in such drastic ways, that the future of technology seems intrinsically linked to our social culture. The "Third Place" (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006) of online communities is a new area of study; considering whether participation supports participants towards a positive outcome. There is a concept of empowerment, and how the virtual world can affect different social locations and their place in the world. Social interaction in a virtual setting is diverse in nature; almost every interest has an online community, which may chat, message, create, or plan for action. Having access to other people who share your specific interest or concern without having to travel physically can allow social communication without the boundaries of time or location. A study with a virtual peer to peer problem solving group (Mathwick, Weirtz, & DeRuyter, 2008), showed mutual collaboration even between new users and more senior members. The subjects felt that they were part of a "family" and had an authentic community experience, even though they had not met the other members face to face. In addition to the social engagement, when the subjects in this study suggested a boycott of a certain corporate sponsor, it illustrated a collective power.

Internet access can also empower marginalized users, those who may have trouble mobilizing politically as minorities in the culture. The ease of establishing and locating other minorities on the internet for representation can change the power dynamics for traditionally marginalized groups (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). A 2004 internet study (Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop) studied LGBT, low income and African American female internet users, and found that although each group utilized the internet community in a different way, all benefitted from the community in an empowering way. The LGBT users in this study were politically motivated, creating a mailing list for their community members helping them to attend political action activities, thus empowering them to be respected in the larger community. This proposed research which examines LGBT participants that write fan fiction about social issues that these marginalized groups face, may show that the interaction with a virtual community of writers may be empowering in their real lives.

By belonging to other cultural communities through the internet, students then face those questions of culture and acceptance, and develop skills of interaction and adaptability for the future (Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008). Specifically, there may be identified social locations that benefit more from online community empowerment than others. Weber, discusses the concept of Social Location as "an individual's or group's special 'place' in the race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies" (Weber, 2010). Since social location is addressed in a variety of social standards, one might experience different levels of privilege at the same time. For example, a person might belong to an educational class that is regarded with high status, but also belong to an ethnic class which is less privileged. Socially, there are a variety of standards, stereotypes, and rankings in this culture; a way of relating other humans in their class/ranking system. Therefore, one might relate to different social hierarchy levels concurrently, and the levels change with the social

standards of the time period. The LGBT Discourse or social location is marginalized in mainstream culture, and the online participation in a fan fiction community gives an option for empowerment and interaction with a supportive community, like the online fan fiction community of *Glee* writers.

Current research has shown that the youth of today have seen location changing empowerment through online communities. Berg (2013, p. 33) writes that "Identity is not something inherent and stable; rather, it is constructed and contingent upon social contexts", therefore the fan fiction writing, within the virtual community, is directly connecting with the identity creation or empowerment of the LGBT participants. As the fans write, pushing the gender and sexual stereotype norms or boundaries, they are socially interacting with their virtual community. Since "language, literacy and text are seen as integral components of how adolescents construct and maintain their sense of place, identity, and value in the social and academic worlds," (Black 2005, p. 128) this fan fiction writing and reviewing, is empowering the fringe LGBT writers, and possibly increasing their social location.

The younger generation, who has grown up with this technological access, and 80-90% use on a daily basis (Luckin et al., 2009), have significant opportunity for empowerment and advancement with online communities. Valatis (2005) found that students working online for a community based project felt that their access to technology for communication and the ability it gave them to communicate professionally with adults was empowering in and of itself. It reduced their anxiety about talking to older, authoritative members of society, was much more efficient, and they felt that the online published work they produced was more significant, since the world could see what they had accomplished (Valatis, 2005). In 2011, a study was done looking at students using online role play to foster discussion of social justice issues. This created

engagement, and the "safe space" and collaboration promoted a deeper understanding of the issues, and pushed the students thinking to a higher level (Doerr-Stevens, 2011). These last examples of classroom usage for youth empowerment could be tool that could significantly impact the success of students in their future. For example, students learning the collaboration, communication, and technological skills through these online community opportunities could utilize these marketable skills in the job market. Rish & Caton (2011) argue that the collaboration in classroom online projects is an important skill for the future worker.

The younger generation and marginalized communities that utilize the online third space for support and social connections vocalize a significant improvement in their well-being and self-image that cannot be ignored. There is no doubt that the virtual world is very real for the participants, and the empowermenon for the user in the form of social connections and community, positive support in a "safe" space, and the positive impact in personal identity and culture makes this third world a powerful place with much impact for the future. This research hones in on a LGBT themed TV program that has a large fan fiction following, and the virtual communities that interact in that third space need to be explored to see what effect the online interaction has on the participants.

Glee is a Pop Culture Phenomenon with Far-Reaching Social Impact

In the fan fiction world, it is easy to detect by the sheer number of fans and postings, which pop culture media event is capturing the interest of the public. The fan base of a particular show, movie, or book can inspire creative works that then inspire others to participate, eventually expanding into a virtual community. The television show *Glee*, with themes focused on popular issues in today's adolescent experience; i.e. bullying, sexuality, non-traditional gender roles, acceptance, has connected with millions of teens, resulting in the plot and characters of that show

being a devoted focus of creative fan fiction writing. The fans, finding a common ground in viewpoints, politics, and personal interests that facilitate more and more contributions to the site, and an interested, responsive audience participating in the creative process. Marwick, Gray and Ananny researched *Glee* fans that reported "…if *Glee* is on there, and if Lady Gaga's on there, and if all these other things that you can enjoy, from the sort of culture we have now, are things that they enjoy, then you have a basic community forming there" (2013, p. 13). The stories about this mismatched group of teen personalities, their relationships, and the social pecking order of the public High School, along with Broadway caliber singing and dance numbers, have numerous fans watching, reading and writing continuously as the show progresses. At of 2015, there have been 109,000 *Glee* themed stories posted on www.fanfiction.net (https://www.fanfiction.net/tv/) , 357 different *Glee* fan communities on the site (https://www.fanfiction.net/communities/tv/#), and 213 *Glee* forums to discuss the topics, storylines, and fan fiction writing connected with the show(https://www.fanfiction.net/forums/tv/#).

Glee, at first look, may seem to be a typical teen soap opera, but it has much more depth. One study refers to it as "A cultural text that provides a particular complex set of representations of gayness and youth" (Jacobs, 2014). It is also one of the first network shows to have multiple homosexual characters, especially in a series with a teenage fan base. *Glee* "contains a number of queer characters, deviating from traditional television formats where non-heterosexual identities are typically contained to one token character" (Meyer & Wood, 2013, p. 435) which allows the plots to explore relationships with LGBT characters with greater depth, and the complexities related to coming-of-age as a non-heterosexual person. When this highly watched show presents alternative lifestyle relationships in a mass media format, it can offer debate and contrast to traditional viewpoints. Just by viewing a program it may "…produce and distribute representations

that challenge traditional positions on social issues" (Dhaenens, 2012, p. 305). These *Glee* fans do much more than passively watching the show, they then have social media and virtual participation with their fan community. "Programs like *Glee* operate as transmedia objects, remediating and spreading consumable texts across media platforms for voracious mega fans, but viewers also find meaning in these programs as cultural objects in and of themselves" (Marwick et al., 2013, p. 2), so any fan has a multitude of options available to talk, text, post, message, and create art related to the aspects of the show that connect with the viewer.

LGBT bullying, as a major thematic plot point on *Glee*, has sparked an immense response from fans with the writing regarding one of the main characters, Kurt, a gay male, as he "came out" to his friends and family. The storyline involving Kurt is considered to be "one of the creator's groundbreaking moves" to have "a major storyline revolve around a gay adolescent male, Kurt Hummel, and his coming of age story" (Falter, 2013-14, p. 290). As Kurt bares his soul and expresses his innermost thoughts and fears regarding other people's response to his honesty, the reaction of the other characters, positive and negative, it opens up communication about the real life experiences of LGBT youth in the public school system. Kurt's experiences touch on the raw nerve of fear that teens express regarding bullying in their daily lives. Dhaenens (2012) wrote:

By featuring narratives that tackle homophobia within high school environments, *Glee* reflects on gay teen bullying in contemporary societies. Most of the gay characters are involved in a storyline that represents their victimhood or fear of becoming a victim. Being gay is represented as a condition that will likely coincide with unhappiness, loneliness, and the feeling of being under a constant threat of verbal of physical violence. (p. 310)

The undercurrent of fear experienced by the character of Kurt, resonates with viewers, as well as the inner conflict of those LGBT teens that are faced with the dilemma of how or when to talk with

their families about their non-traditional/stereotypical relationships. For instance, while studying viewers of this program, Dimaio (2013), found that while watching the plot unfold as Kurt "came out" to his father, some fans began comparing it to how their experience might be similar or different. One subject in the Dimaio (2013) study, Andrew, said:

> I really had no idea when I was planning to come out to my parents, and like I said the episode where Kurt comes out to his dad, just kind of shows the softer side, that was a spark of hope for me, that maybe my parents will do the same. I obviously didn't do it immediately but I thought on that for a while and tossed it back and forth before finally deciding that it was worth the risk. (p. 5)

Glee, for this particular viewer, actually influenced the timing of how this significant event in his life would occur and the way in which he communicated to his family. Marwick et al. (2013) found that for "…gay identifying young men, *Glee* served as both a source of frustration and potential raw material for conversations they hoped to have one day with friends and family about their own queer identities and desires" (p. 11). With the ability to see characters that represent LGBT teen experiences, marginalized viewers can finally see relationships and communication that connects with their daily reality. The representations of LGBT youth as displayed in *Glee* can be empowering for the non-heterosexual viewer and they can be "validated by these characters' experiences, just as straight viewers are invited to recognize models for correct and incorrect treatment of young gays and lesbians" (Jacobs, 2014).

    Glee promotes a message of tolerance and understanding, along with a transparent, honest examination of LGBT characters and relationships in the forefront of the plot, as opposed to minor/marginal characters. The LGBT relationship pairings are positively written, with sincere and passionate dialogue marked by "emotions and maturity" where "…the presented couples

respect each other as equal partners, support others in their search for identity and tolerate mistakes and deviation" (Krause, 2012, p. 5). The political agenda of this writing is as unmistakable as it is ground-breaking and *Glee* "betrays an earnest desire to produce positive, affirming images of gay teen experience, marked as such" (Jacobs, 2014). Stereotypical gender roles are constantly debated and confronted, and "many characters perform gender in ways that do not fit the binaries of male/female and masculine/feminine; they perpetually challenge these dichotomies by offering the viewer a parodic humorous take on gender norms" (Falter, 2013-14, p. 292).

With *Glee* consistently showing non-traditional relationships, flipped gender roles, and bringing often marginalized LGBT characters and relationships to millions of viewers on a weekly basis, there is undoubtable conversation and discussion in many communities that begin to alter social and cultural norms. Meyer & Wood write that viewers of *Glee* "identified that presenting different viewpoints opens dialogue between and among fans about important cultural issues" (2013, p. 15) and Falter goes even further in his 2013 article, saying:

> Rhetorically speaking, *Glee* offers educators a powerful means of exploring marginalized and hidden messages because of its cultural relevancy and persuasive appeal for adolescents. With bullying on the rise in schools, *Glee* has the power to dismantle hurtful, discriminatory practices and language, replacing them with accepting, inclusive dialogue and actions. (p. 296)

The possibility that our social/cultural norms can be altered and changed in connection with the television show *Glee* and the devoted writing of its fans directly reflects the significance of the research connected with it. The fan base and viewership of this show is changing how LGBT youth participate in society and how they are accepted/treated by the outside world.

By deeply probing into the writing and reviews posted on the website fanfiction.net in this

research, I examined the motivations for the participants to contribute their creative work to this site. The show *Glee*, whose LGBT representations and experiences break ground as a main stream media event, has inspired many marginalized youths to create literary events devoted to bullying and social justice issues for those who do not fall into the heteronormative role of the typical high school student. By utilizing these characters and plotlines, participants may be exploring their roles as they grow into adults, coping with the significant concerns and conflicts that are often shown in their real lives and in the media. One study summarizes *Glee*'s effects on its fans by writing "These young people use the show's discussions of bullying in school, coming out to family members, and dealing with friends who may not know their stands on LGBT politics as social-sexual scripts as they work through myriad concerns" (Marwick et al., 2013, p. 10). This research investigated if the virtual contributions, on the fan fiction site, with a community of like-minded supporters may help LGBT adolescents cope with the stresses that face marginalized youth in the high school culture. Researching the appeal and motivation for contributing on the site, as well as the real life supports and potential understanding of diversity in our culture, could make fan fiction a new method for educators to help all adolescents explore social justice issues and reduce conflict and bullying in our schools.

CHAPTER 3- METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In chapter one, I described the experiences that led me to this area of research, with my fan-level interests in the program *Glee*, its treatment of marginalized youth in the bullying plot lines of the show, and the relevance of these out-of-school literacies to the English classroom. Then, I described the fan fiction writing inspired by the program, and the open, emotional, rawness to the postings, discussions, and reviews on the website www.fanfiction.net. My research question was then introduced, exploring the interactions of participants during literacy events on the site and how that process may affect understandings or perspectives related to LGBT teens and bullying. In chapter two, I reviewed past research and theoretical frameworks that supported this study, concentrating on the concepts of "design" and "new literacies" as described by the New London Group's (1996) seminal work on this subject.

For chapter three, I will explain the research process that was utilized during this study, including participant recruitment, data collection, analysis, and the research methodologies that were used to investigate these online literacy practices, and issues of ethics and confidentiality when engaged in online research. Mann and Stewart (2000) and Hine (2005) have written prolifically on the topic of online research, tying traditional qualitative research methods with the online platform to not only research online actions but to utilize internet methods to collect data. Hine wrote that "By investigating the burgeoning epistemic culture of internet research, we would add an important depth to the reflexive awareness of the field and contribute more broadly to understanding of the conditions of contemporary knowledge production" (2005, p. 246). For this study, the internet gave relative anonymity for the participants, and as they discussed sensitive

topics related to marginalized LGBT youth, this level of privacy was key to the free expression of diverse opinions and thoughts that connected to my research question:

1. How might the social interactions around the literacy events on fanfiction.net contribute to adolescent participants' refinements in understandings, perspectives, actions and tolerance of diversity, particularly as it relates to LGBT teens and bullying, as demonstrated in their original writing as well as in their commentaries and responses to other writers?

Research Design

The design of this research was qualitative in nature, as the interactions and social relationships of the participants as they interacted on www.fanfiction.net were central to my study. Qualitative research focuses on the "quality of relationships, activities, situations and materials" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008) and the "natural setting is the source of the data" (2008, p.422) which were the postings and reviews on the fanfiction.net website. I chose this design for my research because of the interwoven relationships between the fan fiction writers and their audience of active reviewers, and the conversations, critiques, and supports that occur during the literacy events online.

For this particular study, my goal was to gather data on selected specific participants and create multiple case studies for analysis. Ethnographic case studies always include the culture of the group, or in this study, the culture of the site and participants, in the research and a "consideration of people and events in their natural habitat" (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, p. 117). By gathering data on the fan fiction participants and deeply exploring prolific writers/reviewers on the site, I was able to learn more about how the literacy events and fan activities *around* Glee affect adolescent participants' understandings and attitudes toward LGBT teens and the concurrent bullying that often occurs in schools.

Researcher Background

After 11 years as a classroom English teacher, I have changed roles in my profession and have become an administrator in the public school system. It is not typical for an educational administrator to pursue research in the field of curriculum and instruction, but I feel strongly that administrators in the school system need a thorough understanding of best practice instruction and curriculum to make the best possible decisions for students and educators at the building level. As decreasing budgets affect staffing within the school system, administrators are now taking on the roles usually filled by curriculum directors and are now designing professional development, creating programming for at-risk youth, and deciding on funding for educational programs and texts. The in-depth education that I have received in my course work has proved invaluable in curricular decisions with my position, and allows me to be the educational guide that is needed for teachers and parents so they can support their students on their path to higher education.

For me, this research was a combination of the major concerns that occur in my role as a high school principal. When working on school improvement plans, major focus areas include implementing literacy strategies and creating a positive to support students in their academic goals. (Allington, 2001, Dole et al., 1996, McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Therefore, this study examined not only high interest digital literacy events, but also the effects the online relationships and literacy interactions had on certain perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of adolescent participants. Fanfiction.net has over 2 million users (http://ebookfriendly.com/fan-fiction-websites/, 2014) and 8 million pages in written posts, with such diverse interests that it fits many subject areas. As we have worked in our district to link books into all of our subject areas, teachers would be able to explore those books as digital literacy events on fanfiction.net, to improve reading and writing. As an educational researcher, I was intrigued with the interaction and participation on

this site, and the virtual connections/communications revolving around these literacy events and the possibility of adjustments in personal understandings regarding LGBT issues. As an educational administrator, an ancillary benefit to this research is the possibility of utilizing information from the study for applicable benefits for the classroom. The possibilities of sharing information with teachers in my building during professional development, to start conversations regarding interactive literacy events online, with the hope of integration into the classroom, may transform literacy instruction into a hands-on, high interest, meaningful experience for the benefit of my students.

Research Perspective and Role

The interpretive paradigm and a sociocultural view toward literacy suited this research because both are based on the belief that reality is socially constructed, or that "what people know and believe to be true about the world is constructed or created and reinforced and supported as people interact with one another over time in specific social settings" (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010, p. 67). Another part of this paradigm is that it "defines shared constructs and meanings as 'situated'" (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010, p. 68). The meanings are located within the social group that shares the situation. For my research, the members of the fanfiction.net site had their own meanings, practices, and norms, and as they interacted with each other during the literacy events, I explored the effects this had on the participants.

Symbolic interactionism is a constructivist epistemology, but placed against a "backdrop of pragmatist philosophy" (Crotty, 1998, p. 72). Through Mead, Pierce, Dewey and many other pragmatists, eventually the view of culture and society that developed was that it should be a world "to be explored and made the most of" (Crotty, 1998, p. 74) as opposed to being subjected to harsh critique. This explorative philosophy then stretched into ethnography, which although originated

in anthropology, was seized by sociologists so that researchers could "observe it [culture] as closely as possible, attempt to take the place of those within the culture, and search out the insiders' perspective" (Crotty, 1998, p. 76). The attitude is one of discovery, not of judgment, so that the researcher can understand the meaning making based on experience those groups of people experience. For this research, I used symbolic interactionism, or more specifically, an ethnographic application of research.

Participants and Recruitment

For this study, I chose to look at a "microculture" of adolescents that are using digital literacies in the genre of fan fiction. McCurdy and colleagues define microcultures as "smaller groups that exist inside society" (McCurdy, Spradley, & Dianna, 2005, p. 14). This is a small microculture, which was "easier to manage...in detail than a large one on the surface," (McCurdy et al., 2005) of participants on an online fan fiction site, that publish online, and receive feedback from other internet fans. I chose this because it was also "open" and "unfamiliar" (McCurdy et al., 2005). It was "open" because there was unlimited virtual access to all online postings written by participants and it was unfamiliar, because the majority of my experience with the writing process as a student and teacher had revolved around the traditional pen/paper method, as opposed to the vast new digital world.

Purposive sampling was used for this study, and I chose fan fiction participants that posted prolifically on the Glee portion of the site and have an active fan base for reviews, to be able to have a rich context for research purposes. Purposive sampling is the "deliberate choice of an informant due to the qualities that the informant possesses" (Tongco, 2007). For this research, I looked for fan fiction writers that posted often, specifically about the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgendered) storylines on Glee that directly connected with my research question.

I was able to recruit ten high school age students, five 16 year olds and five students that were 17, that were active participants on the Glee forum on www.fanfiction.net. In consideration of the LGBT topic, gender was not a consideration in participant selection, and in the survey data collected they were given the option to identify as male, female, transgender, or to skip the question. Nine of the participants answered the question and identified as female and one participant opted out of answering. Eight of the participants attended public school, one a private high school, and one chose not to answer. All the selected participants interacted (posting, reviewing, and responding) at least weekly on the site, with 50% of the participants reporting daily logins. The participants all had been members for at least 3 months, and six had been members for a year or longer. Finding applicants took much longer than I originally estimated, but I found ten participants that met the criteria by July 2015 and completed all aspects of the study by the end of that September.

To recruit participants, I posted an advertisement directly on the www.fanfiction.net site, and asked the directors to post it on the various *Glee* discussion forums and community pages to reach a larger audience. On the site, there are 341 different communities directly related to *Glee* and it is one of the most popular forum sites, with 214 different groups (www.fanfiction.net, 2014). To recruit, I reached out to the forum directors that had sites directly related to LGBT character pairings and LGBT writing topics, to allow for the advertisement to connect more specifically to potential participants that would have an interest in my research. Also, as a member of the site, I was able to assist with the recruiting process, by using the PM (personal message) function to respond to participants who fit the qualities that connected with this research. As in several other studies have been previously conducted with this fan fiction site and participants (Black, 2005, Thomas, 2006, Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, Tosenberger, 2008, etc.) I was also able to find the

number of participants I needed to have a rich data source for this study. IRB approval from WSU occurred in April 2015, with an expedited review, and I was able to get the needed participants by July of 2015.

Snowball sampling, where informants refer the researcher to more informants (Noy, 2008), was also a method of recruiting participants for this study. When navigating this specific microculture, personal contacts on the site helped me to navigate the large fan fiction participant base, so I could find active writers and reviewers that had an interest in participating as an informant. One contact was a site administrator who reached out personally to her network of writing participants, connecting them to my advertisement, which made many more potential participants make contact. One of the early participants assisted as well, contacting co-writers and those who followed her writing with my advertisement information. She also made the recommendation to reach out to the site administrators of forums that focused on a female character *Glee* pairing, and which resulted in more interested subjects contacting me for possible participation. Making use of these "natural social networks" (Noy, 2008), allowed me to find participants that may not have responded to a general advertisement, but would be interested upon the recommendation or communication from a fellow fan fiction writer.

Informed Consent

Ensuring that participants receive all of the information regarding involvement in a research study and that they fully comprehend what that research and participation is the "Key issue to be addressed anew when creating a framework for ethical online research practice" (Mann & Stewart, 2000, p. 48). These authors go into great depth discussing options for virtual communication for consent, and recommended advocating through the researcher's institution for email consent. For this research, I examined similar virtual dissertation research, and have found

a fellow Wayne State University graduate/classmate, Kattie Hogan**,** who received a waiver for "written informed consent and parental consent because the use of signatures and parental involvement would involve collecting information not pertinent to the study and beyond the norms of online communication potentially increasing the risk for participant in terms of privacy and confidentiality" (Hogan, 2012, p. 48) for a similar study researching teenage girls on a live journal website. I then contacted our IRB Administration Office, submitted a summary of the proposed research, and received a response that since the data I was collecting from the site did not require permission or special access, it would be considered to be public data and a waiver of consent/assent was granted. The interview consents were also waived according to 45 CFR 46 116(d).

Research Setting

I selected the website www.fanfiction.net for the research setting, which had over 107,000 stories posted regarding *Glee* (www.fanfiction.net, 2014) at the time of this study. The amount of participants and postings made this site the best choice for the research, and I had been utilizing it for mini-studies and preliminary research since 2010. Although there are similar fan fiction sites, fanfiction.net is one of the largest and also offers the review feature, where readers submit commentary in posts onto the site, therefore "providing a more detailed and intimate form of feedback to contributors" (Warschaur & Grimes, 2008). This interaction between writers and reviewers was central to this research, and fanfiction.net utilizes the reviewer's postings in a searchable, easy to read format.

To participate on the site, members create an account, linked to an email, and then can design a profile (options include author's notes, pictures, username, and demographic information). The fan fiction writing is then linked to the member's account, and is also posted

chronologically on the site, so that readers can find their favorite author, or screen entries through their search engine filters for beloved characters or plotlines. The entries are listed on the site with a short summary, along with an age appropriate rating, word count, and number of chapters. The reviews are also provided as a direct link, so readers can read the comments before reading the stories, and see how many people have read the entry.

Data Collection

For this study, data was collected from multiple sources including: observations of participant activity on www.fanfiction.net, three semi-structured interviews, fan fiction entries, a demographic questionnaire, and a reflexive research journal for confirmability. By using various data sources, the research or data findings can be cross checked against each other for validity and triangulation of data. It is always a challenge to get the depth of data, without a lengthy study, and online research methodology is breaking new ground in qualitative methods that qualify; however, with the wealth of writing that is posted on the site, the detailed profiles of the typical writers, and the endless reviews and posts collected, this reached the level needed for "thick description" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316) criteria levels.

Data Source Table

Data Source/Description	Purpose	Collection Process	Analysis method
Questionnaire: Survey style questions to gather demographic data/participation level	- Participant Demographic Data - Data regarding site interaction frequency and depth	- Questionnaire was emailed at the start of research period (estimated date – July 2015) - Participants prompted to return Document via email within one week, some reminders sent via Personal Message or email were needed	This data was reviewed to determine whether potential participants meet expected research criteria/expectations (see Pg. 67-68 for full description)
Fan Fiction postings and reviews	- Data collection including stories, narrative authors notes, profile information, reviews written by and towards participants - Document the activity occurring on the site and among participants	- Postings and reviews were collected during the research study period (dates July- Sept 2015) along with archived entries/reviews from January-June 2015 –during season 6 of *Glee* - During the study I read through postings/reviews at least once a week - All postings/reviews were cut/pasted into a word file, identifying information was removed, and then saved onto a hard drive (password protected computer in locked area), and hard copy (locked file cabinet in locked office)	Narrative analysis was utilized with the fiction story postings, authors' notes, and reviews. Discourse Analysis was used to analyze the interactions between and among participants, i.e. interactive review conversations or messages
Researcher Reflective Journal	- Documented researcher reflections, struggles, concerns, questions, and connections throughout the process	- Every week I documented my reflections, questions, and thoughts, after reviewing the posts and reviews of the participants - This journal will be written in word format and saved on a hard drive on a password protected computer in a	I reviewed the writing in this journal to examine emerging connections or themes in response to the research process

	- Analyze emerging themes	locked area and also printed into hard copy and kept in a locked filing cabinet	
Interview	#1 Initial interview, to explore participants' motivations for utilizing the site, how they interact, what their perceptions are of the writers, reviewers, and social connections on the site related to *Glee* fan fiction. #2 Interview focusing on personal author experiences, their original writing, reviews written and received, along with interactions with other participants on the site related to *Glee* fan fiction #3 Interview to discover possible reflections/connections to real life experiences, understandings/perspectives on issues related to *Glee* and LGBT tolerance and bullying issues *Follow up Interviews were not needed for clarification purposes, regarding the information/data gathered in interviews #1-3.	- I arranged the three interviews with participants at intervals through the research period. Goal was First two weeks of July 2015, First two weeks of August 2015, and First two weeks of Sept 2015: once a month during the research period. However, some participants needed longer timelines which I negotiated via email or PM - Interviews were conducted during dates/times mutually agreed upon for Participants and researcher, utilizing personal message through the fan fiction site, and/or an agreed time period with email exchange (initial interview questions and follow up expansion questions) No follow up interviews were needed.	Narrative analysis was used for all three interviews, examining the data collected from the fan fiction writers and coding/analyzing the responses into a story/plot-like response that would translate into forming individual case studies. If the participants give responses that include actual reviews or text/email conversations had between participants, that this was be included in the "Fan fiction postings and reviews" data column, and Discourse analysis and were utilized accordingly.

Postings and reviews

With this research plan I looked at archived story postings, author information, and reviews for each participant and then I collected further entries and literacy event interactions posted during the study (July-August 2015). During that time, I examined and logged data regarding frequency of posts, number of reviews, and the content of the stories and reviews to create case studies that allowed me to better understand how each participant utilized their profile and interacted with literacy events in the community, as it pertains to the research questions and goals of this study. Each participant was given a pseudonym for use in this study, and the list that connects the fan fiction username with the pseudonym was printed and saved in an excel spreadsheet, along with the dates of contact and responses. This was then saved to a hard drive and flash drive and destroyed at the termination of the study period, per IRB expectations. The research data was collected into word document format, and saved onto a hard drive and flash drive (after personal information was removed), and also printed into a hard copy. The flash drive and hard copy was locked in a secure file cabinet, within a locked office, and the computer was password protected.

Interviews

Interviews allow researchers to "capture peoples' thoughts and feelings in their own language. Such data provides important insights into individual experiences and cultural practices" (Nastasi, 1991, p. 1). This research was specifically looking at the possible adjustments or influence that the interactions during the literacy events had on the refinement of understandings and beliefs of the participants. Three semi structured interviews, were given to all participants through personal message or email. The method of communication was chosen at the preference of the participant and their comfort level of responding in real time and/or feelings about lengthier written responses. Most chose to utilize the PM (Private Message) vehicle, while a select few chose

to utilize my personal email. The interviews took around 30-45 minutes to complete and were sent at the beginning of each month during the research, but there were adjustments as needed through mutual arrangement of the researcher and participant. Some participants requested early interviews due to vacations/school exams, and others needed longer timelines to complete. None of the participants chose to do the interviews in live time, but preferred to be asynchronous in their responses. I did offer my email address through Gmail or the email server utilized by www.fanfiction.net, if they found email to be a more user friendly form of communication, but the majority of participants expressed their preference for PM as the medium of communication. The interviews allowed me to collect data on the personal experiences of the informants as they posted on the site. The interviews were given 3 times throughout the study, with specific questions tied to the data collected on their recent postings. The first interview focused on their perceptions of the website interaction, fan fiction writers, and the interactions they encountered on the site. The second probed into the author's personal experiences on the site, their stories, and the reviews received or relationships they made on the site. The final interview was more reflective, exploring how the fan fiction writing experience has affected them personally, in real life and as a writer. The areas that this study explored through those interviews included their personal responses/thoughts/feelings regarding participant interaction through reviews on the site, any real life effects from the literacy event interaction, and refinements to beliefs and understandings regarding LGBT diversity/acceptance connected with fan fiction writing.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used in this research, to gather demographic data and levels of site participation. This questionnaire was administered at the start of the research period, before the first interview, during the recruitment process (May-June 2015). As participants responded to the

advertisement (Appendix A) posted on www.fanfiction.net, a link to survey monkey, an online survey site was emailed to them to complete. This was sent with the email function on the site, which was directly connected through participant's profile information. The intent of the questionnaire was to gather data directly related to the criteria needed in this research, to help select appropriate participants that met the expectations for involvement. After consultation with our University IRB representatives, we ensured that the questionnaire could be sent and completed before the submission of consent, as it related to basic demographic data and posting frequency.

Researcher Reflective Journal

The reflexive journal method is more of a "diary in which the investigator on a daily basis, or as needed records a variety of information, about self and method" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 327). If the researcher does frequent reflection, about the methods, subjects, process, this can provide very valuable analysis of the project and critical information for one who would be conducting a similar study or wishes to apply the data to another group. A researcher journal was utilized during this study, which provided insight into the research process, exploring ideas and possible questions that influenced future data collection and interviews. At later dates, it also helped me to refresh my memory regarding the order of events during the study, as well as significant moments that occurred with participants.

Organization of Data and Findings

With this research, I created individual case studies for the participants utilizing narrative and discourse analysis. Bruner (1987, 1991) writing about the narrative mode, claimed that the human imagination is what allows us to make experience meaningful and that it is through story that we construct reality. Narrative analysis is a way of analyzing data by examining the stories of participants. Reissman (1993) writes that this form of analysis "takes as its object of the

investigation the story itself" so the research I was not only looked at what was described in the story being told, but why the story is told in that way. The method of analysis was used for the participant interviews, authors' notes, reviews, and fan fiction creative story postings.

Bell (1988) used narrative analysis when conducting research with DES daughters, women who had been exposed in-vitro to a popular drug (diethylstilbestrol) that was prescribed to prevent miscarriage. In their adult lives, these women became prone to a variety of reproductive issues, including cervical/vaginal cancer. The participant interviews/narratives in Bell's research were then analyzed and coded into abstract, orientation, complicating action, and resolution/coda, creating a story that made meaning out of the data collected. As Bell advised, the interviews in my research had open ended questions with a minimum of interruptions, letting the participant's voice flow freely as they tell their stories through email or personal message. Using this method appealed to me as a researcher, with the context of looking not only at the participants created literary creations online, but then to analyze their interviews by organizing the data into stories. The authors' notes that are posted publically on the site, along with the participants' profile notes, and reviews were also analyzed with this method, as they all are part of their personal story. As Reissman writes, "Individuals become the autobiographical narratives by which they tell about their lives," (1993, p. 2) the author's notes, interviews, and reviews all are reflective of the participant experiences and personal narrative.

Narrative analysis was also utilized for the participants' collected fan fiction stories/postings. Storytelling is a natural human action that is continually in practice during our lives, even as young children. I believe that using narrative analysis for the participant writing connected well with the data, as the method creates stories not only with the author's personal narratives, but also with the writing they create. In this way, I was making stories with the life

experiences of the storytellers and the stories they wrote. The possible objections to this style of analysis are the subjectivity of the researcher, who is edits the "story" being told. It is "not possible to be neutral and objective," (Reissman, p. 8) however, when the data is organized in this fashion, it becomes more accessible for learning. It is an "interpretive practice" (p. 13), but adds shape and flow to the data for comprehension. For purposes of this research, narrative analysis was used for the stories participants relate through the interview process as well as the stories that emerged through their writing and comments on Fanfiction.net

In combination with the narrative analysis, participants' posted reviews on the site will be analyzed through Discourse analysis. Gee (1999, 2005) in his book "An Introduction to Discourse Analysis Theory and Method," discusses that language is used not just to impart information but to support social interaction and cultural affiliation. He discusses how language is political and situational because the use of certain words, phrases, and inflection reflect the speaker's culture and the situation in which they are speaking. Discourse analysis is the "study of language in use," (Gee, 2013) and the reviews that the participants post spark online conversations between author and reviewer, and that interaction relates with Gee's discussion of reflexivity, or exchange of dialogue (1999) that is embedded with situational references and the choice of words used in the discussions. The reviews include *Glee* specific vocabulary that is deeply contextual, and the format deemed appropriate (short, lots of encouragement, the use of emoji's and excessive punctuation has created sets of norms and cultural values that are situational within that site and for the use of reviews and feedback. When Gee wrote "language and context being like two mirrors facing each other and constantly and endlessly reflecting their own images back and forth between each other" (1999, p. 97) this echoes the continually evolving interactions between fan fiction author and their reviewers, with the circle of reviewing and editing that is transparent through the postings on the

website. Just as Gee believes that "Language has meaning only in and through social practice," (p. 8) this method aligns with data collected around a literacy event in a social context like fan fiction and allowed me to find commonalities and emerging themes. The story plot formed by the data, in combination with the narrative analysis of the writing, interviews, and authors' notes, and then translated to individual case studies of the participants.

Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), "trustworthiness" in research is simply, "How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?" (p. 290). Since the research is only as good as the researcher and his or her methodology, these topics/questions are important for every researcher to consider. To reach the goals of validity and reliability needed for credibility in this proposed research, I used a researcher journal, member checks, an audit trail, and persistent observation. Trustworthiness is an essential goal; our findings are only as good as our methodology. If we want qualitative and ethnographic studies to be respected in all fields, the process must be sound and transparent. The educational field lends itself well to ethnographic methods, and the data that is produced from such studies could advance the educational field significantly. These methods that ensure trustworthiness add weight to our findings and legitimacy to our work; all researchers need to examine these concepts at length before conducting any study.

Member Checks

Using the PM (private message) function on the site or through email, the initial interpretations were communicated to the participants, asking them to reflect upon the accuracy of my writing and to make adjustments or clarify particular aspects. This "asking of one or more participants in the study to review the accuracy of the research" is called member checking

(Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008, p. 453) and can be utilized to ensure validity and reliability in qualitative research. This interaction took place throughout the study, during their semi-structured interviews and through email/PM interaction. I also submitted initial drafts of my writing for review and commentary, and while not all participants responded or provided feedback, the commentary I did receive was very positive. The case study participants, since the writing featured their experience with more depth, did all respond with feedback. Ashling, the first case study, commented that she enjoyed reading what others wrote, and that she "really loved how you have portrayed me and my views…" (personal communication, 2015). Tasha wrote that my analysis made her think about her writing and how it may relate to the people in her own life (personal communication, 2015). Lana, while initially confused regarding her pseudonym (she thought perhaps I had mixed her up with another participant), also sent some positive reviews, writing that she felt the chapter was "well put together, you catch a glimpse of the writers lives while not drifting off the main topic" (personal communication, 2015).

Persistent Observation

To meet the expectation of persistent observation, which identifies characteristics, ideas, and behaviors that connect directly with the investigation for further focus (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), there should be extensive time spent with the participants during the study. For the three months of the study, I was directly accessible through PM and email for all participants, allowing for constant communication. I made contact with the informants through email several times throughout the time period for interviews, questionnaires, and member checks, to allow for frequent opportunities for communication. Data was collected online through the posted reviews and fan fiction stories at a minimum of twice per week, as well as an exploration of back logged archival stories for the 3 months prior to the study date. This lengthy collection of data and

frequent contact/ communication allowed me to deepen my understanding through observation and reflection, and built my relationships with the participants that led to a feeling of trust and openness that was reflected in the information collected during the interview process.

Audit trail

With an audit trail, "researchers provide clear documentation of all research decisions and activities" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128). As I have described earlier in this chapter, the research methods, study design, and participant selection, as well as the data collection have been explained in detail for this study. All data collected was organized and documented during this research and is transparent in the findings, results, and appendices of the completed study. With this research, I utilized the recommended qualitative expectations of validity and reliability to establish trustworthiness, to ensure accuracy in my findings.

With internet research, there are often concerns regarding ethical behavior in an online space. By following the norms of behavior on fanfiction.net, asking permission from the site and forum managers for posting the advertisements, and following all informed consent expectations through IRB, I ensured that my informants remained comfortable and safe within their participation in this research. Mann and Stewart (2000), claim that the ethical decisions of online research remain the responsibility of the researcher and that the "priority in qualitative research is to protect the well-being of the participants" (p. 63). By following the process described in this chapter, I kept that expectation of well-being for the informants as the focus of my research process and design.

Summary

This research investigated how the literacy events of 14-18 year old participants on www.fanfiction.net could contribute to differences in understandings, actions, and acceptance of

LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) teens as they interact with their writing, reading, and reviewing of fan fiction literacy events. In this chapter, I outlined the proposed participant selection, research design, participant selection process, data collection details, and the analysis process. This design was created to have data collected from multiple sources to ensure triangulation of data and meet the expectations of trustworthiness in the study. The research examined the interactions of participants as they were involved in the literacy events on *Glee* fan fiction, to see effects this had in their thoughts and reflections regarding LGBT tolerance or bullying, and the extensions into their real life actions or decisions.

CHAPTER 4- THE VIRTUAL WORLD OF *GLEE*: HOW WRITING ABOUT SINGING MISFIT TEENS CAN CHANGE LIVES

Over a three-month period during the summer of 2015, I read and analyzed fan fiction stories, participants' reviews of one another's stories, and participants' literacy transactions on Fanfiction.net. I also distributed three separate interviews to ten participants who agreed to be a part of this study. Data sources included three semi-structured interviews, fan fiction entries, a demographic questionnaire, follow-up interviews (as needed) and a reflexive research journal. (Please see chapter 3 for a detailed description of the methodology).

This chapter is a discussion of the major findings and themes that emerged from my analysis of the data. These findings are presented primarily in three case studies as well as general discussions which include all participant data. As explained in chapter 3, I chose this method of organizing the data because it supported the narrative and discourse modes of interpretation. All ten participants met the criteria outlined in the advertisement, were active members of the site, and between 16-17 years of age. Five of the participants were sixteen years old and the other five were seventeen at the time of this study. The nine participants that chose to reply to the optional gender question identified as female, while one participant chose not to disclose their gender identity (Surveymonkey.com- results in appendices). When I reviewed fan fiction stories of the participants, three of the ten had significantly more *Glee* posts than others. Ashling wrote 26 stories on *Glee*, Lana had posted 30 *Glee* stories, and while Tasha only posted 5 fan fiction stories, she authored a fifteen-chapter serial story that was over 36,000 words, which is almost twice as long as this dissertation chapter. The other participants averaged 7 stories in comparison, with shorter lengths. The number and volume of the fan fiction that these three posted onto the site allowed for deeper and richer data analysis, and all three are featured as case studies later in the chapter. In addition to the case studies, the discussion of findings also includes analysis from all

ten participants. As diverse as the participants were in culture, interests, and socio-economic status, three major findings emerged that were common across all ten participants: 1) literacy transactions on the fan fiction website allowed for participants' ongoing and emerging understandings of LGBT issues; 2) the anonymity of the website created a safe space which allowed for exploration of LGBT topics, and 3) the "normalization" of this exploration by the fan fiction community allowed participants to more deeply explore LGBT issues which, in turn, led to new ways of thinking for all participants and direct extensions outside of fanfiction.net for some participants. How this occurred and the implications of these findings varied across the ten participants, and this will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Considering that www.Fanfiction.net is the 440th most popular website in the United States, and its visitors are overwhelmingly teens and emerging adults" (Campbell et al, 2016) the findings of this study could be impactful for educators trying to build more accepting, tolerant climates in their schools. With recent transgender policies and legislation, (e.g., North Carolina's recent transgender bathroom law as well as the controversial suggested language for transgendered school policy in Michigan, per the MDE), this study took on new meaning and a deepened significance for me as both a researcher and an administrator. As I reviewed and analyzed this data, I couldn't help thinking of the participants' writing and experiences in connection with the debate that surrounds education today for my students.

As the analysis presented in this chapter will demonstrate, for these participants, interacting around the literacy events on the fan fiction site gave them encouragement as writers, acceptance of their progressive views on LGBT relationships, and a creative outlet to experiment and "try on" different perspectives, points of view, and gender identities with little risk of judgment from fellow fans, whose reviews were consistently supportive.

As I detailed in Chapter 2, *Fan Fiction Community and Culture*, the guidelines for use on www.fanfiction.org specifically address the expected behavior on the site, and users can be removed if they are reported as abusive. The author or anyone reading the review can report abuse, and the site has options for type of abuse: language, spam, or other. Those choices could fit any review, whether the comment is actually abusive, or simply constructive, although the report guidelines have a disclaimer that "critical or harsh reviews are not considered abuses" (https://www.fanfiction.net/report_review.php?reviewid=231402480).

The community members also self-police reviews, critiquing those that they may find to be negative, allowing for the participants to be more creative and experimental. This self-policing includes reviewers reprimanding through posts to those who comment negatively on this site, and/or labeling the reviewer as a "flamer," (fan fiction slang for someone who uses harsh commentary while reviewing). When "flaming" occurs, fan fiction writers quickly rise up in defense of the writer being critiqued and they offer more positive reviews to the author, demonstrating their support. In their 2016 study, Campbell et al, found that reviewers in their study were "primarily providing supportive comments" and that they observed that the limited negative comments resulted in "far more community members [coming] to the defense of the author of the story being criticized." Considering the quick reporting and shaming of those who would be harshly or unfairly critical in their reviews, and the overwhelmingly positive nature of the majority of reviews, the norms and values of the fan fiction culture creates a welcoming virtual space where a writer can feel safe exploring controversial or marginalized LGBT themes in their writing.

As I read and began to analyze the participants' fiction stories, I noticed that their writing delved into the inner thoughts of characters who represented diverse gender and sexual orientations, creating dramatic scenes around LGBT issues. Finding opportunities in the day-to-

day life of a teenager that could replicate this virtual experience are rare if not impossible. McDermott and Roen, in their article *Youth on the Virtual Edge; Researching Marginalized Sexualities Online*, wrote "In the context of an overwhelming heteronormative and gender-normative social world, young people who feel "at odds" with sexual and gender norms have limited options to access alternative meanings to explain and explore their experiences" (2012, p. 566). Fanfiction.net, for these participants, was the safe, encouraging space to have positive interactions around LGBT literacy events, which allowed them to explore their experiences. As the analysis of the data will demonstrate, this exploration contributed to the development of their understandings, perspectives, and tolerance of diversity as well as their actions

In the remainder of this chapter, I present the three major case studies, along with the three related findings (itemized on pg. 2) in order to provide analyze and discussion of the experiences of all ten participants in the study. As I conducted this research, the emergent findings were deeply connected with the personal experiences and writing of the participants, which provided a frame that allowed me to understand why the interaction on www.fanfiction.net had such an impact on these teenagers. As I organized this chapter, my goal was to create a similar experience, so the in depth case studies are interspersed with some of the more general findings, which allows the reader to see a very personalized experience of a participant, their stories, personal experiences, and relationships on the site, along with the findings of all participants.

In the next section, I introduce Ashling (all names are pseudonyms), the first case study. Ashling is a *Glee* fan fiction writer whose writing featured her favorite couple, Kurt and Blaine, who are male lead characters on the show. Ashling is a prolific writer and frequent visitor to the site and analysis of her writing/activity on the site as well as her interview responses, allowed me to better understand the virtual world of fan fiction writing as it relates to the research question in

this study. As you will read, Ashling, after interacting on the site for more than two years, felt strongly that her interaction changed her understandings on LGBT issues, and extended those expanded perceptions into her off-screen life, prompting her to create a Gay-Straight Alliance at her school to reduce bullying among students.

Case Study- Ashling

Ashling was a researcher's dream participant; articulate, open, and prompt in her responses to interview questions. As I progressed in this research, I usually had to remind my teenaged participants multiple times regarding responses to interviews, resending and messaging the interview prompts, politely asking for estimated dates for return communication. However, Ashling differed from the norm, always replying within days, and expressing her excitement about being a participant in the study: "It has been a pleasure to answer these questions so far and I am looking forward to the next interview" (personal communication, August 7th, 2015). Her answers to the prompts were as thoughtful and meticulous as her response pattern, with lengthy paragraphs that showed care in vocabulary and grammatical choices that seemed well above her seventeen years. On the initial survey, Ashling identified as female, and indicated that she was a student at a public high school (survey response, 7/2/2015). Ashling also responded that her writing focused on a particular same-sex male pairing, Kurt Hummel and Blaine Anderson, whose relationship was featured on the *Glee* series. The stories that she tagged as "favorites" on fanfiction.net also featured that same pairing, and she followed other authors whose writing centered on this couple. Her *Glee* interactions solely revolved around the characters of Kurt and Blaine, but she varied her writing and reading from "fluff to angst" (fan fiction profile, updated 9/23/2015). "Fluff" fan fiction is usually light and romantic, usually a short "day-in-the-life" story (http://expressions.populli.net/dictionary.html) while angst is exactly what it sounds like, a story that

would give the reader feelings of anxiety or fear. So although Ashling's writing was limited to the two same main characters, her interests in the genre, tone, and style of the fictions were more open to variety.

At the time of this writing, Ashling had been a fan fiction member for two years, and visited the site daily (survey response, 7/2/2015). She had written nineteen *Glee* stories, mainly "One-Shot" or stand-alone short stories, but also some serially published multi-chapter pieces that received over 40 reviews from the community. This is significantly higher than her other stories, which usually were under 10 reviews. When examining the participant review numbers, I noticed that longer stories with multiple chapters often had higher review numbers because readers have the option of reviewing after each individual chapter is posted. While her profile (a virtual space on the site where an author can relay information describing themselves and their writing) was minimal, without any pictures or images, Ashling did offer links to her Tumblr blog space and invited community members to communicate with her through her personal message link. "If you ever have any questions or queries about me or my work don't hesitate to contact me :)" she wrote on her profile (Profile update, 9/23/2015). Since I was focused on the fan fiction site during this research, I did not visit her Tumblr space, but multiple participants shared that they posted their writing in both virtual spaces to reach larger audiences. At the time of this writing, I did attempt to find her Tumblr blog, but it has been shut down and the address took me to an error page. Ashling's open communication style extended to me as a researcher, as she was one of the only participants to share her full name, email address, and google profile image. While most of my participants indicated that they were female and between 16-17 years old, Ashling was the only respondent that I was able to see in a picture, as her image was reflected in a lovely blue-eyed, dimpled brunette selfie connected to her email account (google profile public image shared,

6/22/2015). However, this openness did make aspects of this writing slightly more difficult with respect to confidentiality. Ashling is the only participant in this study who allowed personal information on her fanfiction author profile that could potentially violate her privacy as a result of the data collected in this study. Although this was not required per my IRB approval, as an extra security precaution, I have also altered her story titles, as the site does allow for the public to search for authors with that criteria. The title pseudonyms I designed to reflect the writer's intent as a fan fiction artist, but with enough difference to ensure that all precautions were taken to preserve her confidentiality as a participant. All other participants utilized the suggested privacy expectations recommended on the site, and did not disclose personal contact information, so this step was only implemented for Ashling. All other titles are true to the original authors' intent.

OTP- one true pairing and Ashling's exploration of an LGBT relationship through online writing.

Ashling's fan fiction stories were all One True Pairing (OTP), which is one of the many fan fiction communities' created vocabulary terms to describe various kinds of writing. In my research journal, I noted many new terms/acronyms that were commonly utilized in the story summaries and reviews. OTP writers write exclusively about their favorite character pairings in all of their fan fictional stories and it is typical for them to combine the two names of the characters to signify the relationship (similar to media outlets that feature celebrity couples in this way, i.e. "Brangelina" for Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie). Ashling's favorite character combination was "Klaine" (survey response, 7/2/2015) which is the pairing of Kurt Hummel, an effeminate, elfin, homosexual male teen, and Blaine Anderson, his trendy, curly haired boyfriend. On *Glee*, this on again-off again couple meets in season two, and their tumultuous relationship culminated in a

spontaneous marriage in the closing season, that showed a flash forward to their fathering a child through a surrogate.

On her profile page, Ashling, in response to an interview prompt asking about how she creates and posts stories on the site, cited that her motivation for writing was solely based on this pairing because of their relationship "dynamic and chemistry" (Profile- Updated, 9/23/2015). In interview #1 (7/8/2015), while responding to a question asking her to describe her writing process, she mentioned the "chemistry" between Kurt and Blaine, writing "…it was always known that they were meant for each other" and "they are so comfortable and at ease with each other, they're so in tune." Her stories often included descriptions of their verbal back and forth commentary and physical interactions, from comfort cuddling when Kurt momentarily lost sight of their five-year-old daughter in It Won't Happen Again (10/26/15) "'Oh Baby, I'm so sorry.' Blaine collapses into their embrace, his arms coming around both of them, holding them close, "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry…,'" to mature rated sex scenes in Under the Belt where Kurt asked Blaine in the middle of physical interaction, why oral sex is called a "blow-job":

> He (Kurt) still looks confused, trying to figure it out. "I mean it's not like you blow on someone's dick so why call it that?" "Fuck it…If I tell you will you get back to it? Because not to be rude or anything but you were in the middle of something." Blaine gets a nip to the thigh in return, "Please enlighten me good sir, and I promise it will be worth your while…" he says as he playfully smirks up at him. Blaine chuckles, "It's supposed to be below-job because it's below the belt, but it sounds just like blow and people got lazy with it and it became blow-job." "Hmmmm…interesting." "Now. Will you please get back to *ohmyfuckinggod*." Kurt winks, *fucking winks*, from below and continues to suck Blaine, working his tongue *just so*.

While this graphic sex scene is far past what would be acceptable for a primetime television show or classroom writing projects, the topic and banter Ashling wrote for this story is very similar to what would be written on the program. One reviewer of this story wrote that she "could have so seen that happen in *Glee* at some point." The positive reactions and lack of shock from the accepting fan fiction audience regarding LGBT storylines allowed Ashling to explore even graphic sex scenes with her favorite pairing. When asked about how LGBT storylines on *Glee* inspire fan fiction writers (Interview #3, 8/29/2015), Ashling wrote that people like to spin off of the LGBT show plots and "…make it more pronounced than the show(s) have done," which directly supports the third finding in this study, regarding the positive acceptance of LGBT storylines from the fan fiction community that allows for participants to explore further into LGBT issues and themes. This is reflected in the reviews that Ashling received on her stories about Blaine and Kurt, where community members asked for her to expand her stories: "update soon, please!" (fanofchrisC, 7/08/15), suggested different points of view to explore other character's feelings, and offered direct suggestions of what areas in the story could be expanded, "I can't wait to see the choices Blaine makes and how that relates to the decisions he and Kurt make as a couple" (thepoweroflove, 3/30/15). Ashling, wrote in response to a prompt asking her to describe the feedback she receives on her stories, that her reviews are varied from encouragement to the reviewers' ideas on the "plot, characterization, the writing" (8/07/15) and that she liked when people shared those opinions, "because it helps me to gain a new perspective on the whole idea of which I am writing, to see it through the readers' eyes and not just my own" (Interview #2). So, as the participants write and post their fan fiction stories, that are not bound by the limits of what is considered to be prime time appropriate when writing about LGBT themes. Their fans then post reviews asking for more writing, different character's perspectives or inner thoughts/monologues, which then motivates the

writer to expand further on those topics in future stories or updates. Perhaps that is why Ashling believes that "the stories are more realistic to real life situations because there are no restrictions to how far the author can go and so they can make the situations a lot more serious than the show can," (Interview #3, 8/29/2015). Not only does the community not have the restrictions that a television show would, the fans themselves have created a positive climate on this site that encourages exploration of LGBT themes, with reviews as motivation and encouragement for more writing.

The series finale of *Glee* aired in March 2015, and the fandom continues to utilize the fan fiction site for more posted writing. All of my research and interaction with participants took place after the ending of the show, and all were actively posting, reading, and reviewing frequently, sometimes daily, on the site. As Fallon, a 16-year-old female participant stated "I just love the idea of keeping the fandom alive long after the end of the show" (interview #2, 8/03/15). Even without new episodes and storylines, the *Glee* fan fiction writers continue to create new storylines, exploring new ground with the characters. At the time of this writing, eighteen months after the last broadcast, the *Glee* forum has over 109,000 stories posted, over 20 in the last 24 hours (www.fanfiction.net, 10/04/2016). It will be interesting to see what twists and turns the fan fiction stories will take, without further television episodes as influence, with a fandom that wants these characters to live forever.

Ashling's variety in fan fiction writing topics and themes.

While Ashling focuses on Kurt and Blaine as central characters, her numerous stories cover a spectrum of moods and themes from celebrating Christmas, to recovering from bullying attacks. In this section, I will highlight the depth and variety of her writing, in order to highlight how fan fiction writing presents opportunities for writers to explore many different LGBT issues and

themes. One light themed story revolved around Kurt getting Blaine a puppy for Christmas (What do I get him for Christmas?, (10/24/2015):

> "Do you like him?' Kurt asks very unsure. His bottom lip between his teeth. He watches as a tear tracks its way down his cheek before the biggest toothy smile overtakes his face, lighting up the whole room and he hugs the small sleepy pup to his chest. 'I love him.' He breathes out, completely overwhelmed" ending with the couple in a group hug with the new puppy.

This light hearted vignette is in complete contrast to the story she wrote about Kurt's recovery from a violent bullying incident:

> Blaine looks on at his boyfriends back, scattered with bruises. Some new: blue, black, and purple. Some old: yellow, green fading into white. Up nearer his shoulders he sees scars. Some red and angry, obviously new. Some pink, no older than a few weeks. Underneath all that are the white long lines, oldest of them all. Locker slams and dumpster tosses, all caused by homophobic jocks who live in the past. They must have been from before his Dalton days. He stares wordlessly as he takes in all the sadness, pain, and anguish that his boyfriend has suffered. (Return to Bullying, 3/18/2015).

Ashling believed that the violence she described in this story was more realistic than what was shown on the television show. In response to an interview question regarding how fan fiction is different than the incidents on the show, she wrote that "with the audience *Glee* has (teenagers) there are certain restrictions to do with appropriate content for the age" (Interview #3, 8/29/2015). She further responded that she believed having this anonymous space to explore LGBT topics that push the boundaries of general social acceptance is "very important for young people as it represents the people who are different, who are excluded from society and it gives them a voice.

A voice to say it isn't ok and it shows them that things do get better and life is worth living." The story settings and plots also reflect the LGBT characters' navigation in a heteronormative environment, as *Glee* was set in a small Midwestern town with traditional values and social norms.

This juxtaposition of character and setting in Klaine's homosexual relationship in a blue-collar, right wing small town is another reason Ashling cites as inspiration for her writing:

I also like looking at the different aspects of their relationship, what with it being homosexual, and the fact that they're living in a very conservative and unaccepting place. It helps me convey how even though they face all this prejudice they still pull through with their heads held high because no matter how many people want them to be apart or even gone forever, they didn't because they love each other, and is just as simple as that.

(Interview #1- 7/8/2015)

Although Ashling is a female writer, her writing was centered on male characters with a same sex relationship, often dealing with abuse and incidents of prejudice. Ashling connected with these stories as she responded to a question regarding any personal experiences with bullying (Interview #3, 8/29/2015) as having been bullied for her appearance and it "definitely knocked my confidence quite drastically." She then started interacting on the fan fiction site directly reading about bullying topics because she "needed an outlet," and the stories she liked reading the most were ones that tackled the issue and got a "happy ending for the character" (Interview #3, 8/29/15). She could then work through her own feelings regarding her experience by reading about the LGBT bullying plot lines. In response to an interview question regarding how fan fiction and the interactions on the site affected her life apart from the site, Ashling reported that her parents were concerned about how much time she was spending reading for "hours every day, but they did not realize that "without it everything would be worse for me" (Interview #3, 8/29/2015). She then continued the

response by writing that when she began posting stories "…it was a lot better for me personally. It was another escape and as the reviews came through it boosted my confidence." For Ashling, not only did the interaction expand her ongoing understandings of LGBT bullying issues, as in my first finding in this study, it even allowed her to process her body-image bullying experience and find a creative outlet that boosted her self-esteem.

The possibilities of perspective and monologue: exploring various characters' feelings in response to LGBT issues.

Ashling often wrote her stories from Kurt or Blaine's perspective, allowing the audience to hear their inner monologue. In this section, I highlight some examples of the changing perspective in her fan fiction writing, that allowed her to explore LGBT issues with narrators that had different backgrounds, concerns, and experiences. For example, in Will they even care? (7/4/2015) she writes about Kurt debating about telling his Dad that he had been bullied and kissed by another character. "Oh God…his Dad. What the hell is Dad going to say when he finds out about this, he'd flip. Maybe it isn't the best to tell him…He doesn't want to be the reason for his Dad to have a second heart attack." Another example, from *Return to Bullying* (2015), is written from Blaine's perspective, as he realizes he is in love with Kurt "Wait, wait, wait. Love…? Yeah, love. He really does love Kurt, who wouldn't love someone as compassionate and caring as him?"

Occasionally, Ashling wrote from an outsider's viewpoint, allowing a third person narrator to explore the inner thoughts and opinions about LGBT relationships held by a minor character and, as in the following example, potentially overcome the prejudice that the characters Kurt and Blaine are subjected to in episodes of *Glee*. In *A Distance Away* (2015), she wrote a short sketch about a senior citizen who sees the couple after their engagement, and allows him to reflect on how acceptance has changed through the ages:

He sees them from afar at first. Just the two of them walking hand and hand as they make

their way through the park. Thomas knows that a lot of people would still turn their nose

up at them and damn them to hell, or some religious crap like that…Even at his age of 72,

Thomas knows that love is love, no matter who between. Yes, he was raised in a Christian

household and yes he was told that marriage is between a man and a woman, but as he

grew older and matured into his own self instead of the mould his parents put him in, he

realized that life isn't so black and white.

This vignette ends with the older gentleman wondering if he will see them again, with wedding

rings, and a general reflection of how he believes that love should always be accepted. This

example of tolerance is countered by other, more somber stories that show the potential hurt and

violence that can be experienced by LGBT teens, from being called names (<u>Value)</u>, or threats of

violence and sexual assault (Every day Torture<u>)</u>. In the story Respect, Kurt's new stepbrother calls

him a "fag" which brings Kurt to the realization that he will have to deal with prejudiced people

for the rest of his life, and he contemplates suicide.

Kurt sits on the bathroom floor, the tears finally falling. They're endless as they pour down

his cheeks and onto his shirt. He feels so empty, hollow. He truly thought Finn understood

him and accepted him. It was all a lie. He feels angry. Angry at Finn, angry at the world

for being so hateful. Maybe he wasn't meant for the world. Maybe he should just end it.

(4/13/15)

This lack of understanding from people that have not experienced LGBT bullying or prejudiced

behavior also carries into <u>Every Day Torture</u>, where Kurt's fellow students accuse him of

overreacting to the mean behavior of other students and questioning if his claims of abuse are

truthful. In this story, Ashling then references a plot point in the show, where a male bully actually

kissed Kurt against his will, which was a popular topic for fan fiction after the episode aired, having Kurt say:

> 'He kissed me when I didn't want him to. He violated me. I didn't deserve it, I didn't ask for it, but that's what I got.' He stares at Santana who now looks as if she is going to throw up. 'and there is nothing I can do to change that' (6/16/2015).

By utilizing different perspectives in her writing, Ashling used monologue to work through or address some of what she perceived to be primary concerns (e.g., bullying and prejudice) both in the lives of the characters and in her own life. Because she perceived Fanfiction.net as a safe space, she was able to use her writing of stories to work through some of her fears as well as to express her faith in the ability of individuals to alter behaviors and/or change their ways of thinking.

LGBT relationships on television as inspiration for writing exploration.

Ashling's writing focused on the characters of Kurt and Blaine, who were her personal favorites, but Ashling also believed that the coupling of Kurt and Blaine on the show, *Glee*, was ground breaking for national TV because this was   the first teen homosexual pairing as a main storyline. She said in our second interview, when asked how she would describe her writing, that she found Klaine to be inspirational "…due to the fact that they were one of the first gay couples actually shown on TV and I think for a lot of kids and teens at that time found that very special and encouraging in their own lives" (8/7/2015). While this isn't actually factual, as the first gay couple to appear on television were the characters of George and Gordon in Norman Lear's short lived 1975 series, *Hot l Baltimore*, Kurt and Blaine's relationship was a main storyline, and did break ground exploring LGBT topics that had not been explored on a series before.

For Ashling, the pairing facilitated more ideas for writing stories that expanded on the show's storyline. Ashling created many short stories that had Klaine married with kids, living in a future world that is accepting and welcoming. In It Won't Happen Again, Blaine loses their daughter on the beach, and then when the couple finds her at the guard station, she runs to their arms calling "Daddy" and "Papa," and the audience seems to not have a negative thought about the same sex marriage and adoption. The conclusion of Will they even care? has Kurt's father, who was portrayed occasionally on the show in a homophobic manner, taking care of Klaine's daughter so they can sleep in and have sex:

> 'Okay, okay…I get it, I'll let you sleep. Happy Birthday, son.' He kisses his forehead before leaving the room, and Kurt sinks back into the mattress happily, turning on his side to face his husband. He shuffles forward and kisses his mouth, ever so softly and what he hears next makes him snort. 'Sex?' (7/9/2015).

Ashling's stories all contained the OTP of Kurt and Blaine. The main themes of her stories explored the quality of Kurt and Blaine's relationship, how they resolved conflict regarding LGBT prejudice, and explored a future world where they can live freely as a couple.

Ashling's fan fiction interaction and how it allowed her to explore LGBT issues and gain understandings that extended into her personal life.

Ashling, when asked to describe her writing, said that she enjoyed writing in the angst and romance genres, as she preferred to read similar plots that included the Kurt and Blaine pairing which then inspired her to write accordingly. (Interview #1, 7/8/2015). While most of her stories ended on a positive note, with conflicts resolved and the pairing happily together, she did dabble in reading more somber or dramatic texts. When asked to describe what she thought or felt after reading other Glee fan fiction that followed the LGBT bullying storylines, she wrote "However

there are stories that the authors will like to leave a more depressing note. Maybe the character is still dealing with their issues or have succumb to the bullying and hate that they have committed suicide. I still find it interesting to read though because it still brings understanding to the readers" (Interview #3, 8/29/2015). On the fan fiction site, members can post their favorite stories that others have written, and Ashling included <u>My Last Breath</u>, written by a fellow fan fiction author, which includes a suicide attempt by Kurt after having urine filled balloons thrown at him during a LGBT bullying incident. This dramatic storyline demonstrated Ashling's interest in reading more bleak and solemn writing as the characters' worked through their issues.

Ashling also felt that the conflicts on the show *Glee* were sometimes glossed over, and were resolved too quickly. In her own writing, she tackled topics that were untouched by the television plots. When asked to describe her writing process from beginning to end, she wrote:

> I also really like dealing with angst in their lives, as individuals particularly rather than in their relationship, as I see in the show a lot of places where angst could have been developed further. Like Kurt having to deal with having a new family, or dealing with the horrific extent of his bullying. Or with Blaine and his obviously homophobic Dad, or brother who doesn't show up but when he does all he does is critique him. I like exploring their thoughts and feelings on the matter and see how they'll react, and also how other characters react when they watch them go through it. (Interview #1, 7/8/2015)

Considering Ashling's own experiences with bullying, and how she found solace in reading about bullying themes that were resolved positively, it is a logical extension that she would start writing about those themes and creating her own positive resolutions for angst-ridden stories. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Ashling articulated that writing and reading on the site allowed

her to cope during a hard time in her life, and that interaction expanded her own understanding of LGBT issues, even motivating her to start an anti-bullying LGBT club at her school.

In her story "In the Music Room with my Brother", Ashling explored those darker themes, with constant reflection back to the other characters, so the reader saw how Blaine and Kurt's fellow Glee Club members understanding of LGBT issues were broadened by the couple's experiences. In this story, Blaine confronts his brother who tells the *Glee* club members about their father beating Blaine after he found out that he had brought a boy to a school dance. The end included thoughts from the other characters who watched the two brothers fight as they put themselves in Kurt and Blaine's places "As the couple leave, all of the New Directions (the name of the show choir club on Glee) remain muted as they reflect on how life is really like for those two. You think you know when you see the locker slams and the hurtful slurs as they pass small minded jocks in the hallway, but sometimes it hits you right in the face with the cold reality of the hateful society they live in" (In the Music Room with my Brother, 2015).

When Ashling used the omniscient point of view narrative, she modeled what she felt all people should do in a LGBT confrontational situation, trying to look at incidents from multiple perspectives. When asked in what ways the fan fiction participants interact socially, she wrote "Being in the Klaine fandom, even just the Glee fandom, it opens up a lot of doors for me to see from real people's perspective of what life is like for them being in the LGBTQ community, and I watch them go through some of the struggles it brings" (Interview #1, 7/8/2015). The writing and reading of fan fiction is not the only way that Ashling explored different perspectives, but also when others reviewed her work. When asked to describe the feedback that she received from participants through posted reviews she said that she enjoyed when others comment on her writing because "it helps me gain a new perspective on the whole idea of which I'm writing, to see it

through the readers eyes and not just my own" (Interview #2, 8/7/2015). When asked about the interactions she had with other fan fiction participants (Interview #1, 7/8/2015), she gave an example of her favorite review, where a fan commented that they loved her work and reread all of her stories, and she believes those reviews are the reason why she continues to write. That boost of positivity gave motivation for Ashling to write more and also raised her emotional mood. In response to that same question, she wrote that she constantly checks her emails for review notices and it "does give me a little pick me up during my day" (Interview #1, 7/8/2015). That continual positive acceptance through reviews from the community of writers on www.fanfiction.net, supports the third finding of this study, that the data supports that these positive reviews motivated the participants to further explore LGBT issues through interactions on the site. Ashling made it a point to review other's work for that reason, and when asked what motivates writers to post reviews, she commented that all writers should review because she knows how much it means to her (Interview #1, 7/8/2015). Though typically her reviews are only a few sentences, Ashling's reviews are thoughtful and touching, as shown in her July 26th, 2015 review of Final Air, a story about Kurt committing suicide written by one of her favorite authors on the site, "I'm crying my eyes out right now. This was beautifully sad. Thank you." By thanking an author for sharing their writing, she contributed to the positive community interaction found on this site which, in turn, contributed to further writing and interacting on LGBT themes.

Ashling had a strong work ethic and commitment to participating on the fan fiction site, and she logged on daily, to post, read and review often. In the second interview, when asked to describe her experiences on the site she explained that she doesn't want to "abandon any of my work or my readers" (Interview #2, 8/7/2015) so she updated regularly, consistently trying to write about the experiences of an LGBT couple and the struggles that they go through. This interaction

not only allowed Ashling to gain different understanding of an experience she did not have in real life, it also motivated her to take actions in her off –screen life as well. When asked if her experience with writing and reading fan fiction affected her actions/feelings/understandings in her personal life, she wrote that "when I started to read fan fictions I do believe it has helped me gain better understanding and acceptance for those around me. I think it inspired me to help found the LGBT club at school and my want to help people who experience bullying" (Interview #3, 8/29/2015). That understanding and acceptance from interacting on the site she also believed could help children who are experiencing bullying. When asked to describe what she thought of or felt after reading other *Glee* fan fiction that follows those storylines, she wrote "It feels good to know that these stories will help kids get over any feelings they have and provide an escape for them in times of need" (Interview #3, 8/29/2015).

My interactions with Ashling, through her stories, interviews, and her feedback on my initial analysis of the data connected with all three of my findings, which expanded my own understanding of how deeply fan fiction interactions could change participants' understandings of key LGBT issues. Ashling started her interaction on the fan fiction site as a *Glee* fan, as she processed her own experience with bullying.   But as she began to write and post her own work, her understanding about LGBT issues grew. This development in Ashling's thinking supports the first finding in this study "literacy transactions on the fan fiction website allowed for participants' ongoing and emerging understandings of LGBT issues." For example, in response to a probe asking how fan fiction interaction has affected her personal life, she responded that her understandings regarding the LGBT community had changed and she wanted to continue writing on the site to "continue to help people in the community to tackle these issues" (Interview #3, 8/29/2015). Her work in creating an LGBT support club at her school supports that she has

expanded not only her understandings of LGBT issues, but she is taking an active role online and in her personal life to help spread this refinement in understandings and acceptance in her virtual and real life community.

Ashling felt strongly, as referenced earlier in this section, that interactions on this website created a safe place for writers to push past social acceptance boundaries, even past what could be shown on the television show itself, which had constraints due to the age of its audience and the fact that it was broadcast on network television. She felt that the fanfiction space allowed for more realistic stories, with more graphic sexual themes and bullying violence, giving a voice to those marginalized youths that need support. Her own work in "Under the Belt" and "Return to Bullying" pushes past the socially accepted boundaries, and she utilized the anonymity functions of a profile name, as she posted her graphic work on those themes, which connected to the second finding in this study that the participant's anonymity functions to create a safe space for exploring LGBT topics, plot lines, and characterizations that push boundaries of general social acceptance.

Lastly, Ashling started interacting on the site to process her emotions during a time in her life where she was experiencing bullying, and the supportive reviews that complemented her writing and accepted her writing on LGBT themes motivated her to continue to write, read, and explore further on the site. She has reported how much she wants to continue writing and that the reviews are a motivating factor that she checks almost daily to get a boost of positivity. This directly connects with the third finding in this study, that the "normalization" of this exploration by the fan fiction community allowed participants to more deeply explore LGBT issues which, in turn, led to new ways of thinking for all participants and direct extensions to their lives outside of the fanfiction site for some participants.

This case study of Ashling provided an opportunity for the reader to focus on the world of

one fan fiction participant in relation to the major findings of this study.   In the following section, I present a general discussion of the first finding, 1) literacy transactions on the fan fiction website allowed for participants' ongoing and emerging understandings of LGBT issues. It was the support from various participants in the study, as they participated in various reading, writing, and reviewing activities, that allowed for exploration that led to different and expanded understandings.

Finding #1 - Literacy transactions on the fan fiction website allowed for participants' ongoing and emerging understandings of LGBT issues

All of the participants in this study participated in fan fiction *Glee* stories that tackled LGBT issues as the forefront in their interactions on the site. All reported reading, writing, and reviewing stories with those themes and many expressed how it affected their views on LGBT experiences in their lives outside of the site. Bullying, homophobia, and struggling with coming out were frequently addressed in *Glee* television plot lines, which fan fiction writers then took up and expanded upon in their own writing. Analysis of the data indicated that participants were inspired by the *Glee* plotlines, and connected with those plots through reading, writing, and/or reviewing similar themes on the site. This interaction often expanded their thinking and deepened their understandings of what LGBT teens may experience and have to cope with on a daily basis. *Glee*'s LGBT bullying themes on the show are the inspiration for numerous fan fiction stories, reaching posts of over 900 during a recent search (www.fanfiction.net, 8/22/2016). Bullying due to sexual orientation was a central theme that study participants wrote about or felt strong reactions to, motivating some, like Ashling, to take action in real life, by forming an LGBT support club, to support those who face such issues. As you will see in this next section, findings suggest that this occurred for three primary reasons: 1) the participants in this study utilized the LGBT bullying

themes in their writing and interaction on the site in ways that expanded their ongoing understandings of LGBT issues, 2) the website features that ensured privacy/anonymity allowed the participants to feel safe while exploring those themes, and 3) the supportive culture of the fan fiction site with positive reviews encouraged deeper exploration of LGBT themes.

While the television show *Glee* centered around all of the Glee club members being on a lower, much detested, rung on the social ladder of a public high school, the most violent storyline on the show involved the bullying of a male homosexual teen, Kurt, by a beefy stereotypical football player, David Karofsky. As described earlier in this chapter, on the show, Kurt is beaten, pushed into lockers, and sexually assaulted. The participants in this study responded with stories of their own with similar plotlines, often writing LGBT bullying scenes that punched up the violence with graphic details. An example of this would be Lost Voices (2015), written by Lana, a sixteen-year-old female that attended a public high school, who will also be featured in the last case study in this chapter. Per the survey information collected, at the time of this study, Lana had been a fanfiction member for almost two years and logged onto the site multiple times a week. Similar to Ashling, her writing featured the relationship between Kurt and Blaine, who she named as her favorite characters. Lana's story starts with the idea that the character of Kurt has become voluntarily mute after a violent attack by a group of "jocks" at the high school:

> They had taken him by surprise in one of the alleys close to school. They held him down and lifted Kurt's sweater while the leader of the group of jocks pressed a hand firmly to Kurt's mouth, muting any sound that fell from his lips. He had tried to scream when he saw the other four jocks take out their pocket knives and flick them open but to no avail. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to scream again when he felt the sharp blades cut

through his skin. Then Kurt felt the hot breath of the jock who had his hand clamped over

his mouth and then a whisper: "Make one more sound and you'll regret it" (pg. 1, 2015)

For a relatively short story, only 5 chapters, <u>Lost Voices </u>had multiple reviews, and more than 40

fans began following this story on the basis of that chapter (8/27/2015). Included in the reviews

were pleas for more writing: "wow...more soon please!" and general compliments like "Wow,

great job with this chapter" and "Most amazing fan fic ever!". Others were more specific in their

commentary, talking about how the story affected them and how it allowed them to see the victim's

perspective and hopes for a positive resolution.

> I never review because English is not my first language and I'm too afraid of make
>
> mistakes, but I really wanted you to know that I already love your story! I mean, what
>
> happened to Kurt is really sad and devastating, but I look forward to see Kurt and Blaine's
>
> relationship grow and, most of all, see how Kurt gets over his trauma. Thank you for this
>
> story and sorry for any mistakes (TheLadyHope, 2015)

Another reviewer commented on the shock value, but still asks for more chapters, as it reminded

them that bullying can result in suicidal thoughts for the victim:

> I felt like I was holding my breath while reading this. It's very good written and I can't wait
>
> to read the whole story. When I saw the episode "2009" it reminded me how hard it was
>
> for Kurt in high school and how cruel the other students where towards him. I mean how
>
> terrible must your life be to have suicidal thoughts. It really shocked me, but it also made
>
> your new story more realistic for me. I will definitely read it if you write it - but please
>
> promise me one thing: Don't abandon this story, after I begin to love it! (Dreamkeeper,
>
> 2015)

While that reviewer was shocked by the story content, most of the study participants felt that most fan fiction stories are comparable to real life. Tasha, in interview #3, when asked how the storylines compare to real life, said that the fan fiction stories are realistic "because most of them are written by queer people who are in the real world and know how brutal it can be" (Tasha, 2015). As mentioned in chapter 2, real life bullying incidents are often reported in the news. However, television shows in pop culture don't even begin to reach the violence level that participants in this study feel exists in the world. As Ashling reported in the case study, *Glee* has limitations as to what can be presented to its young audience, so she also wrote scenes that were more graphic and in her mind more realistic. This interaction around the fan fiction stories allows for participants to understand the violent incidents that they may see on the news, by reading, writing, and reviewing stories on those themes, with characters they already have an interest in. They can expand their understandings of those LGBT issues, by interacting with storylines that demonstrate how the victims felt during a bullying incident, and then have written discussion with a sympathetic accepting community.

An example of such an interaction can be seen in Fiona's story: I'm Alone Again, describing a similar dangerous bullying scene with Kurt as the victim of a sadistic homophobic student, Adam, who tricked Kurt into thinking he was interested in dating him, and then beat him up.

Did you really think I was gay? Adam roared. "But…but…" I couldn't even speak. "Don't you get it? I was never a fag like you!" Adam spat. "But…you were they guy who helped me come out!" I tried to stop my tears but I couldn't. "I'm a really good actor." Adam laughed before kicking me to the ground. (Fiona, 2015)

The responses to this story were overwhelmingly positive, with one anonymous reviewer writing "That was amazing. People, whether fictional or real, shouldn't have to deal with stupid homophobics." Another reviewer commented with regards to how LGBT teens are treated by others, saying "Noooooo Kurtey. homophobic's are some... I haven't even got words for how terrible they are." Reviews like these demonstrate the social commentary from fan fiction participants, criticizing the lack of acceptance for the LGBT community, which allows participants to expand understandings, or "gain perspective," as Ashling wrote when she reported she was in favor of those who shared their opinions in reviews (Interview #2).

While participants were in agreement that violent LGBT bullying is a reality, they also voiced their intent for a positive resolution to the conflict, "As in the show, fan fictions tend to have a happy ending…" (Rachel, Interview #3, 9/2/2015). These happy endings, while maybe not as realistic, gave readers hope and made them feel more positive about the LGBT experience. In response to an interview question which asked how they would like LGBT bullying stories to be resolved, one participant responded "I think that we should, in fan fiction, be presenting a positive outlook on life, after all this is fiction and while there may be difficult times, times we feel like ending it all, it genuinely does get better" (Lea, Interview #3, 8/24/2015). Inspirational endings are satisfying for readers, not only because it may aid in making those who are depressed feel that there is hope for the future, but also simply for the elevation in mood. Dianna, when asked what stories she enjoys reading, wrote "When the character is given aid by their peers. People sticking up for them makes me happy" (Interview #3, 8/25/2015). Another participant, Rachel, was also in agreement, and wrote at length regarding her need for happy endings to the bullying storylines, saying that after you make the connection and have sympathy for the character, she wants a peaceful resolution:

This kind of story makes you feel the pain and sadness of the bullied character, and the ongoing struggle of going to school. Then when the action to resolve the situation happens, there is a sense of relief and kind of like a weight has been lifted. After experiencing the bullying alongside the character, you empathize with them, and when they're out of the situation you can't help but feel happy with them. This sometimes means that they're free to be a couple openly with their partner, which just makes the story even happier. Ideally, this is how I'd like the story to be resolved. (Rachel, Interview #3, 9/02/2016)

The bullying storylines involving *Glee* characters were popular with the participants in this study. They avidly read and wrote along those themes, and pushed the violence past what was explored on the show, while still finding a storybook ending for the characters. The bullying that occurred on the show and in the writing resonated with the participants and their perceptions/understandings of what LGBT youth endure in real life were altered. When the authors wrote more extreme bullying incidents, that felt more realistic to them, they were exploring the thoughts and feelings of LGBT bullying victims, and by writing that inner monologue, they could empathize with a situation that they themselves may never have experienced. This virtual "walking in someone else's shoes" allowed participants to experience what a victim of LGBT bullying goes through, which then affected how they thought and felt about LGBT issues.

Participants' personal changes after interacting on the site and altered perceptions of LGBT issues.

A common theme that the participants in this study voiced was how interacting on www.fanfiction.net altered their perceptions about LGBT issues in society. As the girls wrote, read, and reviewed fan fiction with LGBT themes, they began thinking about themselves in the character's places, and wondering what they would do in that position, and how their own

viewpoint may affect others. Some participants reflected on how the interactions allowed them to explore their own concerns or confusion about their sexual/gender identity, others voiced that they have a better understanding of the LGBT experience and have become more sensitive to those who may be victims of prejudicial thinking. Some participants, like Ashling, saw the interactions on the site as having an impact on current culture:

> "I also think it brought a lot of hope to struggling teens who are trying to find themselves, and to have such role models in front of them, I believe helped tremendously, not just with themselves but with the people around them to educate them and help create a more well-rounded and open minded society" (Ashling, Interview #2, 8/29/2015)

During this research, I did not ask my participants to disclose their sexual identity, as I was concerned that it might alienate some writers from joining the study. However, some participants did reflect how the LGBT storylines connected with their experience, and gave a different perspective regarding their interaction and how fan fiction has changed their understandings of LGBT issues. Tasha, who is also featured in a case study in this research, was one of the few research subjects that disclosed that information, and she wrote that she is a lesbian living with her conservative family. Her writing often featured transgendered characters, exploring their first sexual experiences with the same sex, and how the conservative family will react. In her story, Okay than, That works, she gave her readers a short summary of the plot. "Quinn Fabray hates living with her stereotypical Christian family and not being able to tell anybody that she loves Rachel Berry…" (Tasha, 2015). By writing plots that are similar to her own experience, Tasha may be exploring what turns her life might take, and how to handle her family reaction to her own "coming out." As I wrote in chapter three, Tasha, who is featured in the second case study in this chapter, mentioned this during member checks, when she wrote to me that she hadn't made that

connection during her interaction on the site, but after reading chapter four of my dissertation, she began reflecting about this possibility.

Lea, a sixteen-year-old female participant that attended a private school, also felt that writing sexual scenes helped to alter her perspectives about same-sex relationships, and her response when asked to describe her writing on the site was "Writing graphic sex scenes and then watching how both myself and others respond to it after the fact, helps me to understand more about my own sexuality at a confusing time in my life" (Interview #1, 7/6/2015). Significantly, the LGBT storylines enabled the participants that were struggling with or wondering about their sexual or gender identity to interpret the fan fiction interactions in a very personal manner. They imagined themselves in similar situations and used the literary events as a virtual rehearsal for what they may experience in the future. As Dianna, a sixteen-year-old female public school student, wrote in response to a question asking how her interaction with fan fiction affected her personal life; "I understand more points of view and how coming out and queer lives can be affected by others. So I can stand up for myself and ready myself for things that could be thrown my way" (Dianna, Interview #3, 8/25/2015). For these participants, fan fiction is perceived as a shared and collaborative experience. The literacy events on this site allowed them to explore LGBT relationships in ways that made them feel more prepared in their own lives.

Participants also expressed how the fan fiction interactions around *Glee* LGBT storylines allowed them to gain perspective about the LGBT experience, which then deepened their acceptance and understanding of LGBT issues. Ashling wrote:

Without fanfiction in my life I imagine it would be a lot different and my understanding

for the LGBT community would be changed. I have always accepted people within that

community but I believe my knowledge for it would be limited and my ability to reach out

and help others would be different. (Interview #3)

Another participant, Lana, a sixteen-year-old public school student, said she had not had any interest in LGBT issues, but her enjoyment in watching the TV show *Glee* inspired her to interact on the site. After reading and then creating her own LGBT themed fan fiction stories, she reported in response to a question asking about how the interactions may have affected her personal life, understandings, and/or feelings, that "It has affected my feelings about the LGBT community. I never really cared about it at first but when I discovered Glee and the fanfictions, I changed and started supporting the LGBT community" (Lana, Interview # 3, 9/6/2015). Other participants also support that fan fiction interaction has shaped and expanded their understandings of LGBT issues, Rachel, wrote, "I would say, as much as the show itself has, reading fan fiction has helped me become a more understanding person when it comes to what LGBT people have to deal with when it comes to bullying and homophobia" (Interview # 3, 8/25/2015) and Tasha, a seventeen year old female participant, wrote in response to that same question: "I guess I just became more aware and empathetic to people that go through those things" (Interview # 3, 9/17/2015). One participant reported her gradual acceptance of the fan fiction effect on her understanding in detail, writing in response to an interview question asking about possible changes in perception of LGBT issues:

I'd like to say not really. Because at the end of the day it's all fiction. But then you start to realize this can be someone's reality, someone you may even know. And unless you know about it you can't really help. So you tend to get kind of gloomy and sad. But since I read A LOT of fanfic, it has opened up my eyes to what maybe going on in the world. And I'm proud to say it has changed my feeling/understanding/actions to things. I know what terms and statement some people may finding hurtful or mean. So I try my best to not say those

things or anything along those lines. When I'm dealing with a certain situation I do look at

it have all point of views. And I'm more accepting to people when they're going through

something. Now I'm not necessarily the cry on your shoulder type of person. But I do find

other ways to help them and cheer them up. (Dana, Interview #3, 9/11/2015)

For the participants in this research, interacting on the site www.fanfiction.net altered their

understanding and perspectives on LGBT issues, and they reported that they felt more accepting,

more empathetic, and expressed wanting to support LGBT teens on their off screen lives.

In the following section, the second case study will be introduced, featuring a fan fiction

writer that wrote about female or transgendered pairings in a style that is vastly different from our

first case study. While the participants in this study favored different *Glee* characters, different

writing genres, and varied tone/writing styles, the data collected in this study supports the three

findings listed on page two. First, that the literacy transactions on the fan fiction website allowed

for participants' ongoing and emerging understandings of LGBT issues, second, that the anonymity

of the website created a safe space which allowed for exploration of LGBT topics, and third, the

"normalization" of this exploration by the fan fiction community allowed participants to more

deeply explore LGBT issues which, in turn, led to new ways of thinking for all participants and

direct extensions for some participants. The following case study features Tasha, who writes

alternate universe (AU), fan fiction stories that are typically non-canon in content.

Tasha, a very creative fan fiction writer, wrote lengthy, serially posted stories that were

humorous and unusual. Her longest story featured an alternative universe *Glee* character, Quinn,

who defies transsexual/transgender definition as a lesbian female who wakes up with a penis.

Tasha's story plunged right into family acceptance of her character's gender neutrality, others

potential hypocrisy, and hilarious inner monologues as her character navigated a world that is

definitely not black and white, but all the shades of the LGBT rainbow. Tasha, who was the only participant who volunteered her sexual orientation as a lesbian, valued the anonymity of the website which allowed her to write on LGBT themes, while protecting her closeted status with her conservative family.

Case Study- Tasha

I owe Tasha a great debt of gratitude for her contributions to this study. One of her first contacts with me was filled with enthusiasm when she said "I'm actually really excited about this because it's crazy creative and new! I think you're going to do an excellent job with this project!" (personal communication, June, 2015) Her positivity actually led her to help connect other interested participants with this study. That support, along with her wry, sarcastic written humor kept me enthused about this project, which is very helpful for a stressed out doctoral student. Tasha's interest in the project stemmed from her own experiences as a self-described "closeted lesbian in a very religious and southern, Black family" (personal communication, (6/18/2015). Tasha, the only participant who asked to choose her own pseudonym, valued the anonymity when posting on the fan fiction site, writing that being in the "closet" protected her from the "bullying that occurs too often in too many LGBT lives, including bullying at home especially in Black communities." (personal communication, June, 2015). Tasha also had one of my favorite descriptions of the website and the experience of interacting on it, writing "Fanfiction is my free, gay bookstore. I can read and write basically anything I have a taste for because everybody in the community has a different style and someone in the world is going to like the same thing I like" (Tasha- Interview #1, 7/9/2015). This supports finding #3, that the "normalization" of this exploration by the fan fiction community allowed participants to more deeply explore LGBT issues

which, in turn, led to new ways of thinking for all participants and direct extensions for some participants.

At the time of this study, Tasha had been a member of the site for over 2 years, and in her survey (June 19th, 2015) she indicated that she visited the site daily. Her writing included one shots and some longer, serial chapter style works. Tasha featured female *Glee* characters like Santana, Quinn, and Rachel, but usually in AU (alternate universe, non-canon) stories. She said that she did not start writing because *Glee* TV plots interested her, but found that the fan fiction stories that she enjoyed reading featured the characters on the show she liked. She felt that the *Glee* fan fiction writing embraced "gay love… so much more than anywhere else in my real life around me" (Interview #1, 7/9/2015). Lesbian relationships were at the core of Tasha's writing, but often with an interesting AU (alternative universe) twist, like one of the female characters having male genitalia (Okay Then, That Works, 2015). As she explored these relationships in her fan fiction writing, Tasha never lost her comedic edge, as her real goal was to make readers happy. In her first interview, Tasha wrote "On most days, writing is such a blessing. I can escape for my crappy reality and write a few thousand words that'll make me smile and hopefully being a smile on the readers faces when it's posted" (7/9/2015).

Tasha's writing: the author's use of humor to navigate serious LGBT experiences

During the time I was gathering data for this research, Tasha published chapters for one of her longer works, a non-canon fan fiction that starred Quinn Fabray. On *Glee*, Quinn is a heterosexual blonde cheerleader from a conservative, wealthy family. Quinn's popularity and high social status in the fictional high school allowed her to get away with bullying and manipulating other characters on the show. She is a main character on *Glee*, and her primary storyline involves her pregnancy from a relationship with a fellow student and how she copes with the reaction from

her religious family. In her fanfiction story, Tasha kept the conservative family but flipped many of the other traits, portraying Quinn instead as a closeted lesbian who is in love with Rachel, a straight *Glee* character. The plot of <u>Okay Then, That Works</u> (2015) had Quinn detesting her religious, rigid family, and so she prayed for a new family, and "something extra" (Story Summary, www.fanfiction.com).

This story features Tasha's wacky sense of humor.   For example, as the rest of the family prays around the dinner table, Quinn has an inner monologue, where she asks God for "the heart to ask Rachel Berry to be my girlfriend and I'm still holding out for a cock stiffer than Aunt Carol's homemade casserole" (2015).   When Quinn wakes the next morning, she has a brand-new accepting family…and a penis! Tasha, in this alternate universe, maintained that Quinn was a girl, but her first look down her pants has her wildly excited about her new male genitalia "I'm packin! Hell Yeah! I'm packin like FEDEX bitch! I'm Packin like a lesbian on a first date! I'm packin like a rat with swiss cheese! I'm packi…wait, what? Swiss Cheese?" (Okay, Then That Works, Chap. 2). Tasha's writing included colorful language and creative metaphors, which added hilarity to more painful, embarrassing scenes. In one chapter, aptly named "A Broken Nut," Tasha described how difficult it was for Quinn to navigate the world unaccustomed to an extra male appendage. When she invariably hit "her" penis on a table corner, she had to go for medical attention, and was frightened that she had "broken" it! Quinn then thought "…I had a theory that if Rachel saw my pink pelican, she'd be compelled to lick it. Now I can't show her my pink pelican because it is broken and bruised, and the petting zoo is closed forever!" (Chap. 6, 2015). Tasha's style was outrageous at times, and could easily offend a more conservative reader, but her fans filled the page with positive reviews "Can't wait to read more" "…this story is awesome", "I like this story, it's so funny!", and "Quinn's inner thoughts are hilarious."   This supportive audience then

motivated Tasha to write further, eventually writing ten chapters of the story, continuing to push boundaries in this virtual space. Tasha, not only takes advantage of the privacy function on the site to stay anonymous, keeping her closeted status intact as she explores LGBT storylines (finding #2), but also enjoys the positive acceptance and compliments through the reviews (finding #3).

Tasha's writing, while edgy to the point of shocking at times, is sometimes softened by the more tender, hurtful scenes. In Chapter 10, Of Groceries and Memories, Quinn runs into her old family at the grocery store, and while her new family is accepting of her sexual orientation and gender, her old family (who has no recollection of her) hates and blames her for her ambiguous gender/sexual identity. After her father calls her a "tranny" and a "freak show," he then goes on a long rant about her gender confusion:

> 'You, young thing will never be a girl. No matter how many surgeries you have and no matter how much tissue you stuff in your Kmart Bra, you will always and forever be a thing. You are an It. A cross- dressing boy who got in the way of God's work and declared himself a girl. You can be one or the other, but you can't be both. Either way, you'll surely be going to Hell'. I had never seen someone look as disgusted and hateful as Russell Fabray did when he spat those words in my tear-streaked face. 'I'm so glad my daughter is gone, now your demon claws will never be able to touch her and try to convert her to your satanic lifestyle ever again. I pray to God that you and others like you will be destroyed' (Chapter 10- Of Groceries and Memories).

In the light of Tasha's shared background information as a closeted lesbian in a conservative family, I wondered how much of the characters resembled Tasha's family or if the dialogue was how she envisioned her parents' response to her own eventual coming out. Earlier in the story, there was a family dinner prayer, where Quinn's inner monologue described the secret

sins of her family members, from affairs to addiction, while she was too frightened to tell them her sexual orientation/transgendered identity. All of the family characters Quinn described are AU (Alternate Universe) and therefore were not actual characters on the show, but how many of them may have been influenced by Tasha's family is unknown. As she described Quinn's "Southern, traditional, fucked up, Christian family," (Prayer Changes Things- chap.1, 2015) it seems to parallel her own description of her family that she emailed to me at the start of the research. The new family that Tasha gave to Quinn in this story was loving and demonstrative, accepting of their daughter's new body and girlfriend. For example, when in response to the hate speak from her former father, Quinn experienced an anxiety attack, only to be rescued by her parents in the story. Her parents showed a unified, supportive front, comforting her and explaining that she doesn't need to worry about what other people may think. Her father says:

> '… Baby girl, no matter what that monster said, you are always and forever our daughter. You're nothing that man said, ever! You are too good for him and you are too good for those crazy conservatives that can't take their mind out of their asses long enough to open it. I love you so much, Q' (Chapter 10, 2015).

As I read this scene where the parents unquestioningly accepted and demonstrated love for their transgendered daughter, it led me to wonder if this writing was Tasha's desire and dream of how she would like her family to accept her sexual identity. When doing member checks, Tasha read this chapter and did respond back that she was now reflecting on that idea, which had not occurred to her prior to reading this work. It would be interesting to know how much of Tasha's writing is a reflection of her family members and/or their opinions regarding LGBT topics, and whether her writing allows her to navigate conversations on similar issues in her real life. Tasha's surprise at the idea that her writing might connect with her real life experiences demonstrated the distinct split

between her real-life and online world, and how differently she interacted in a supportive environment.

Reviews for that chapter were very positive, complimenting Tasha's humor and plot twists and begging for more chapters. Ayofluff (7/20/15) specifically posted about that scene in the story, posting "I love the way her new parents are with her, and running into her old parents was pure genius. I hope she is able to stand up them some day". Positive reviews like this inspired Tasha to write more. As she said in our interview (Interview# 1, 7/9/2015) "…my absolute favorite part is reading the reviews and seeing that my work made a reader feel as good reading it as I did writing it." Tasha pushed many boundaries in Okay then, that works and judging from the positive reviews, her audience enjoyed the humor and tone. Tasha's use of www.fanfiction.net to explore LGBT issues allowed her to receive positive feedback regarding her writing which includes transgendered/homosexual pairings, while completely anonymous so as not to be outed to her conservative family.

Tasha's fan support system: encouragement and sympathy.

When looking at the data collected with Tasha's reviews and stories, more information about Tasha and her fan support system emerged through her communication with Author's Notes. Within the body of the story chapters, fan fiction writers can preface a chapter with narratives regarding their writing, which can include summaries, explanations, pleas for reviews, or general notes about how the author is feeling at the time. Tasha, with her typical ballsy style of writing, often utilized these brief notes to the reviewers in ways that allowed me to see glimpses into her life and how she truly needs the support of the fans. Tasha, having already self-disclosed her sexual identity as a closeted lesbian, wrote about an incident in the notes of her story Fake Love is Just So Beautiful, describing the reaction of her conservative mother upon reading one of her stories.

Tasha explains to the readers that her mom went through one of her word files on her computer and read a story and her reaction was "Oh my Lord Jesus! My only Child! You're going to HELL!" (author's note, 2014). Although her mother had not discovered Tasha's sexual identity or her fan fiction account, the story alone caused her Mother to ground her as punishment. Tasha, then says that she hopes her fans enjoy the next chapter because she "risked her ass getting beat multiple times by sneaking on in here and writing while I am grounded" (www.fanfiction.net). Tasha risked more punishment to be able to continue her writing and get the fan support, even telling her mom that she was "looking up the bible" on her computer instead of posting a new chapter (author's note, Chapter 6, 2014). After receiving over 200 reviews, full of compliments that encouraged more writing like: "Had me cryin I was laughing so loud! Awesome job, can't wait to read the next one", "Please write a sitcom. This is a shitload of adorable shenanigans and I absolutely adore it!", and "So glad this fic is back. Loved it the first time I read it, and love it even more the second time. Can't wait to read more." After facing such an abhorrent reaction to her writing by her own mother, Tasha encouraged more and more fan reviews, writing "I hope you all enjoy it and review please. They give me sooo much motivation to write, you have no idea!" (author's note- chapter 15, 2014). I would contend that the pleas for reviews by Tasha are not only for writing encouragement, but as her writing is so deeply entwined with her own sexual identity, and her personal family experiences, the outpouring of positive reaction from fans, very different than her real life family rejection, makes her feel more positive about herself. Perhaps that is why she said in interview #2, that on most days her interactions on the site are "…such a blessing, I can escape from my crappy reality and write a few thousand words that'll make me smile" (2015).

Finding #2- The anonymity of the website created a safe space which allowed for exploration of LGBT topics

Tasha utilized the anonymous nature of the fanfiction.net website to publish fiction that has homosexual/transgendered pairings. This is in keeping with the second finding of this study, that the anonymity provided by the website created a safe space which allowed for exploration of LGBT topics. When asked about her motivations for writing on the site, she wrote that "I posted my stories on this site because not only is it another fun way to see the characters, it's one of the only places where I didn't have to change the pronouns in a love story "(Tasha Interview #1, 7/9/2015). By utilizing digital writing, she was able to publish her writing, while still maintaining her "closeted" status with her family. This allowed her to explore topics that might move outside of the accepted social norms in her more conservative family. As McDermott and Roen (p. 566, 2012) wrote, "Cyber space is a place where young people are able to "tell" their stories and explore their identities, experiences, bodies and emotions." For these participants, the anonymous nature of digital interactions on this site helped to support their writing with LGBT themes, which went beyond the heteronormative nature of society experience.

The virtual aspect of fanfiction.net provides protection from identification; Valkenburg and Peter (2011), in their article *Online Communication Among Adolescents: an Integrated Model of its Attraction, Opportunity, and Risks*, wrote "On the internet, adolescents can experience and explore several forms of anonymity." The website has multiple options for those participants that choose to remain anonymous. The members can utilize a username, keep their profile information blank, and have the ability to block users from seeing their writing. All communication is done through private messaging on the site, and then can be sent to your personal email without readers having access to the address. The site also does not display your email account, for user "privacy protection" listed in the account settings. A user can also choose not to accept personal messages, blocking private communication from other users. Fanfiction.net also communicates privacy

precautions for users, and lists their best practice tips for security, which includes advice like "Never give your site login/password to any 3rd party. Staff will never ask for your login password. Our services are 100% free and any 3rd party charging a fee is unauthorized and to be avoided. Do not put sensitive info on your profile: i.e. phone number, home address, photo, full name, date of birth, and etc." (www.fanfiction.net). It is up to the user to employ the suggested privacy systems, but all of the participants in this research chose to have usernames, did not post personal pictures, and chose to not post any sensitive information in their profiles.

While these safeguards protect participants, participants in this study also commented in interviews that the privacy of interaction around literacy events on this site was a motivating factor for publishing fan fiction that had LGBT themes with more personal value. Fallon, a female sixteen-year-old public school student, wrote in response to an interview prompt asking to describe writers on fanfiction, commonalities and differences: "I also think that everyone is looking for a way of venting their problems without anyone hearing or seeing, that's why some may turn to fan fiction" (Interview #1, 7/9/2015). For those struggling with their sexuality within a family that is religious and conservative, like Tasha's, fan fiction writing gives freedom to read and write in the areas of interest of the participants, and still remain anonymous. For some, the show plotlines were less of a motivator than the LGBT fan fiction themes. When asked what inspires her to post on the site, Tasha wrote "I didn't start writing because of the show; I started writing because the fanfiction that I was reading was so much more interesting when it was centered around the characters I actually liked" (Interview #1, 7/9/2015). When the relationships in the fan fiction stories centered on homosexual pairings, they became more relevant to her experience, and it inspired her to write and read more on the site. The privacy of online writing was mentioned by several participants, as they all wrote on LGBT themes, and the acknowledgement of teens having

fear about coming out was mentioned often. Dana, a seventeen-year-old female participant from a public high school, wrote "Sometimes people are in denial about their sexuality and they tend to do everything in their power to hide it" (Dana, Interview #3, 9/11/2015). The participants mentioned privacy often, and enjoyed having a different name/profile for their interactions on the site. The writing feels more private and personal, and as Ashling wrote:

> I believe that this is something for just me to do and I want this to be just for me and my followers. Not many people in my personal life know that I write on fanfiction.net, not because I am ashamed of doing so but just because I feel like it's intimate to myself, and I would find it very invasive if people that I knew just read my work without so much as asking (Ashling, Interview #2, 8/7/2016).

Thus, the interactions on the fan fiction site allow for private exploration of LGBT themes and issues, while allowing the participants to feel safe from identification and judgment. This safe, anonymous space allows participants to post, while keeping a measure of privacy, so they can write on LGBT topics without fear of discovery from those who are less accepting of non-heteronormative topics. Then, after they write, the participants receive positive support and encouragement to keep posting regarding those themes. The following section explores not only our last case study, but the third finding in this study, that the positive acceptance from the fan fiction community allows for participants to explore LGBT topics on the site through their experiences around the literacy events on www.fanfiction.net.

Lana is a sixteen-year-old fan fiction writer that also favors stories about Kurt and Blaine's romance. As a student in a public high school, she is one of the only participants that shared personal experiences connected with being a bullying victim in her school. By sharing that experience with me in her interviews, as I read her stories with bullying themes, I wondered how

much of her own personal feelings were included in her characters' thoughts and actions. Lana felt that the storylines on *Glee* were realistic in their depiction of public school bullying, and that fear is a sad reality for students in their everyday experiences, as it was for her daily within her public high school.

Case Study- Lana

Of all the participants, Lana was one of the more prolific writers, having written over thirty stories for the *Glee* fandom. Self-described as "*Just a girl who loves to write,*" (Profile biography, www.fanfiction.net) Lana was enthusiastic about participating in this study, saying she was "honored" to be a part of it (personal communication, 6/19/15). Showing her full support of the project, she actually refused compensation for participating in the study, saying "knowing she helped someone is already a compensation…" (personal communication, 6/19/15). Lana was very open as a participant, sharing her name and personal email to add to our ease of communication, and she often requested to read any of my dissertation writing in draft form. Her interaction on the site was frequent, posting and visiting on the site multiple times a week (Survey, 6/23/15) and she balanced our interview demands with her busy school schedule. Her fan fiction profile was minimal, just brief sentences interspersed with smiley faces made out of colons and parenthesis, explaining that she lives for "reviews, favorites and follows ☺," and stating how much she loves the *Glee* characters Kurt and Blaine, and has written 30 stories about them (Profile biography, www.fanfiction.net). Lana also lets other fans know that she accepts prompts, allowing other fan fiction members to send her story ideas and she will "write it for you" ((Profile biography, www.fanfiction.net).

Lana is also a "beta reader," a fan fiction writer who is willing to read other members work "…with a critical eye, with the aim of improving grammar, spelling, characterization, and general

style of a story prior to its release to the general public" (https://www.fanfiction.net/betareaders/). Of all ten participants, Lana was one of only two that chose to advertise to read others work and develop an additional profile on the site. As a beta reader, she has a separate beta profile, which can give a fellow fan fiction writer information so that they can pair with the beta readers that could give them the best support. The beta profile is structured by the site to include specific areas: a general description of the beta reader, strengths, weaknesses, preferred stories, and stories they would rather not read. Lana articulates in her beta profile that she is a critical reader, so those who choose her should be "able to take criticism" (Lana, beta profile, 2015). She also wanted to stay close to her fan interests, and requests *Glee* fanfictions, with a preference for her favorite couple. Lana also includes stories that she will not beta read, fantasy stories with "monsters, aliens, and zombies" (beta profile). In examining the main fan profile and the beta profile, her interests in *Glee* and the pairing of Kurt and Blaine are consistent, but her main profile gives the appearance of a cheery, lighthearted fan, talking about all the things she "loves" like writing, *Glee*, the Kurt and Blaine pairing, and all genres of fan fiction stories. Her beta profile is more focused on her role as a serious proofreader/reviewer, saying that she "almost always notices grammar mistakes" and that she "reads stories critically" (Lana, Beta Profile). This second profile added another layer to her persona as a fan fiction participant, as a writer that wants to appear approachable, to encourage reviews of her work and possible future writing prompts, and the opposing critical reader, whose profile ensured that fans who might want her as a beta reader have full knowledge that her responses will not be mere encouragement, but will include grammar and style critiques.

Lana showed candor regarding her personal experiences as a victim of bullying behavior in her first year of high school. At only 16, she described frequent verbal harassment as she transitioned into the secondary school. During interview #3 (9/16/15) when asked if she had ever

had any experiences with bullying, she explained that the everyday stress caused her to feel nauseous, and she began vomiting often as a result. Other students then began calling her "The Puker" and other names, and avoided her like she was an "infectious disease" (Lana, Interview #3). At one point, a fellow student told her that she should commit suicide because the "world would be better off…" (9/16/15). As a result of the continued aggression towards her, Lana started weekly therapy sessions and was prescribed stress-reducing medications to help cope with the daily stress. This experience gave her strong connections to the bullying themes on the show *Glee*, and her favorite character pairing of Kurt and Blaine, the homosexual couple on the show that met as a result of Kurt attending a new private school to escape his LGBT bullying experience. In an email sent to me that included her interview response, Lana wrote:

> Klaine is my most favorite pairing as well because of the chemistry between them. They help each other through life (Blaine helped Kurt with the bullying, Kurt helped him with the whole insecurities thing etc.). There have been a lot of downs in their relationship but that just strengthened it, in some way. (personal communication, 8/14/16)

Lana enjoyed the *Glee* themes that follow the challenges of LGBT bullying, writing in the same email that "Glee is definitely not a simple show. It handles a lot of subjects that would otherwise be a taboo in television shows (hate crimes, people from the LGBT community, etc.)" and that the storylines addressed in *Glee* writing allowed her to know more about LGBT experiences. She said that she is thankful to *Glee* for that knowledge and she is now a "heavy supporter of gay rights" (personal communication, 8/14/15). When reflecting on Lana's experiences as a bullying victim, which then piqued her interest in a bullying storyline, it is interesting that her experiences interacting on this site affected her personal life, now as an active supporter of LGBT rights. Not only did her interaction around the literacy events on the site expanded her understandings of

LGBT issues (finding #1), but she also valued the privacy and anonymity of the safe space as she began writing on the site (finding #2), and then the supportive nature of the fan fiction community motivated her to further explore these topics (finding #3), which then led to actual action in her personal life. It would be an area for future researchers to study how interactions in the virtual world around bullying themes could extend into mobilizing anti-bullying actions in teenagers off screen lives, which, if supported by research, could add another layer to school anti-bullying programs. In this next section, I will expand further on Lana's interaction on the site, and her fan fiction writing.

Lana's fan fiction writing: small snapshots into an LGBT relationship

As mentioned above, Lana's fan fiction writing centered around the characters of Blaine Anderson and Kurt Hummel. She wrote on her profile that "I love Glee's Kurt and Blaine so most of my stories will be about them :)" and her profile picture featured the couple hugging each other. In her third interview, when responding to a question regarding how LGBT storylines on Glee inspires writer and writing, she explained that the homosexual pairing held more interest for her as a writer, since the stories had more stress and conflict, saying "To be honest, stories about heterosexual couples get boring very quickly. There are no struggles that they have to deal with. The relationships of Kurt and Blaine or Santana and Brittany contain things that keep their relationship alive" (Lana, Interview #3, 9/16/15). The majority of her fan fiction stories are "one-shots," a fan fiction term that describes a one chapter, stand-alone story that will not be continued. Her short stories are often placed in the future, with Kurt and Blaine married, and the stories focus on their romance. In the story, <u>Dress You Up</u> (6/8/2015), Blaine is a successful singer who is looking for an outfit for the Grammy Awards and finds Kurt who is now a famous fashion designer. Lana used a song as inspiration and the title (Interview #1, 7/3/2015) "Dress You Up" by Madonna.

This plot echoes the song lyrics "gonna dress you up in my love," as this meeting for designing clothing starts a relationship ending in a future marriage: "And sure enough, they got married three years later. Blaine wore the suit Kurt specially designed for him…and it soon turned into the most beautiful day of their lives" (Dress You Up). Another story published during the research period was Looking Good (8/21/2015), another one shot story that features Kurt and Blaine as a married couple. In this story, Kurt is a fledgling makeup artist, and utilizes his sleeping husband to create a makeup transformation into Hedwig Robinson, the transsexual lead character in the musical Hedwig and the Angry Inch. The dialogue is sweet and filled with affection, a glimpse of Kurt and Blaine's day to day interaction:

> 'I'm not mad at you. The makeup is amazing, you really, really, really nailed it and I'm very proud of my own private little makeup artist' Kurt smiled and ducked his head. When he looked up to meet Blaine's eyes again, he saw how they were looking down at his lips and smiled when he figured out what Blaine was thinking. 'You know you can kiss me, right? The lipstick is stain proof, it won't smudge.' Blaine smiled and leaned in to kiss his husband, 'I love you' (Looking Good, 2015).

Lana also has one serial story, much longer than her typical stories, with a LGBT bullying theme. The story, Lost Voices, which was featured earlier in chapter four, describes the aftermath of a violent hate crime. Writing about the recovery of a bullying victim is an area that Lana felt the show did not delve into enough and in response to a question asking her to describe the LGBT bullying storylines and incidents on the show, she wrote that the "show doesn't handle the trauma…" I wish we got to see more of how they handled the situations" (Lana, Interview #3, 9/16/15). In this story, Kurt is violently attacked and maimed by a group of jocks at his school who carve the word "fag" into his chest above his heart. He then becomes mute, as a reaction to

the incident and is sent to a private school where there is a no-tolerance bullying policy. That is where he meets Blaine, and as they fall in love, they also work through his recovery:

> A single nod from Kurt was Blaine's cue to get up from the bed. He walked over to his own bed and crawled underneath the covers. When he turned onto his side, he saw that Kurt had done the same and they just looked at each other for a moment before Blaine reached for his lamp on his night stand. "Goodnight, Kurt" he whispered right before he switched the light off and settled further under the covers. The last thing he saw before he closed his eyes was the smile on Kurt's face before turning the light on his own nightstand off. It was going to take a while, but Kurt was going to be okay, and Blaine was going to be there every step of the way. (Lost Voices, 2015)

Lana's characterization and dialogue when writing about bullying is realistic and filled with emotion. For example, when Kurt hands Blaine a note explaining all that had happened to him, he is described as pulling his "knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them, making himself as small as possible while Blaine started reading" (Lost Voices, 2015). This story was Lana's most powerful story, with much more length and depth, possibly due to her own experiences with bullying. When asked if these storylines are similar to real life experiences, Lana wrote that she feels that incidents like this are "…really similar to real life. Teenagers outing themselves to friends and family happens every day and hate crimes too, sadly. Bullying and depression are also very common in the LGBT community and are subjects that are being shown in Glee" (Lana, Interview #3, 9/16/15). Her fans agreed, writing many positive reviews, calling it the "most amazing fan fic ever!" and asking for more writing. The reviewers also ask for more information about Kurt's past trauma so that they can better understand his feelings and emotions. The interactions around this story allowed fan fiction participants to talk about difficult LGBT

issues, and explore issues that the community is dealing with. Having that positive feedback when writing and dialogue in an accepting community allows those participants the opportunity to delve into serious LGBT themes. In the following section, I will explore the culture and community of the fan fiction site, and how the supportive nature is perceived by all of the participants.

Finding #3: The community positive acceptance of LGBT storylines during interactions on www.fanfiction.net allows for participants to further explore LGBT issues/themes

All of the participants in this study were in agreement that the fan fiction community they interact with is positive and accepting. Fallon, when asked what inspires her to post on the site, wrote "The Glee/Klaine community inspire me to post on the site. Everyone is lovely and is there for the same reasons, to keep Glee alive. Constructive reviews also help improve people's writing and it promotes a strong community of friendship." (Interview #1, 7/2/2015). That bond/relationship created by the community interactions allows for participants to share personal experiences that are related to the LGBT writing topics. Through personal message or reviews, the participants reported that personal experiences with LGBT issues are talked about with the community for support and feedback. Lana (Interview #3, 9/16/15) wrote in response to a probe asking her to describe the reviews that are posted in response to *Glee* LGBT bullying fan fiction storylines that "Sometimes people tell something about their bullying experiences, too… and I find it amazing that people want to share something so personal with others." That personal sharing can also be in the form of using their own experiences in the storylines, and the positive response can allow the participant to feel "it is an ok thing to do and it's better talked about and written about and fanfiction is a great way of doing so" (Interview #3, 8/24/2015) as Fallon wrote when asked how she thought *Glee* fan fiction inspired others to write. Other participants utilize the space to push the boundaries of culturally accepted sexual behavior, writing very erotic "slash" stories.

Lea, who was sixteen years old, when asked to describe the site and her interaction on it, wrote that she purposefully writes about "…anything I find exciting or new in the sexual world and see how other's receive it and whether these thoughts are considered socially acceptable by most people" (Interview #1, 8/24/2015). Regardless if the motivation is to discuss LGBT issues or to push sexual boundaries, the interactions around fan fiction stories on this website affect how the participants feel about the community. When asked to describe what she thinks of or feels after reading LGBT bullying themed fan fiction stories, Lana wrote "I feel like I've learned something about how people in the LGBT community feel. What happens in those stories might be what they have to go through every day" (Lana, Interview #3, 9/16/15). This interaction supports the first finding in this study, that writing and interacting on this website around LGBT themes affects understandings, thoughts, and feelings about the LGBT community.

Effects of positive reviews: motivation for writing and validation of participant beliefs about LGBT issues.

An important aspect of the interactions that reflect the positive community acceptance are the reviews that participants can post after reading a fan fiction story. Reviews can be anonymous or attached to the profile name, and when a review is posted, the author receives an alert allowing them to receive that feedback immediately. When reflecting on the reviews, participants in this study often cited the reviews as their favorite part of the interaction on the site. When asked which part of the process she enjoyed the most, Tasha wrote, "I love finishing a chapter that I'd been struggling with, I love creating my own little world, and my absolute favorite part is reading the reviews and seeing that my work made a reader feel as good reading it as I did writing it" (Interview #1, 7/9/15). The shared experience and interaction between reader and writer creates a virtual writers circle, and that support allows participants to feel supported in their writing process. Lea

(Interview #2) felt that her confidence grew as her works was reviewed, which then motivated her to post reviews for others so that the authors "…understand that their work is appreciated and that they continue to post" (8/14/16). In the article Words on the Screen: Broadening Analyses of Interactions among Fanfiction Writers and Reviewers (2015), the researchers found that even if the reviews weren't necessarily constructive, but merely "cheerleading", they were still evidence to the author that the work is being read, and that awareness provides motivation to continue writing (Manifico, et al).

The participants in this study expressed that the majority of the reviews they receive and write are positive in nature and that if a reader took the time to review; the story may have affected how they feel about LGBT issues. When asked what motives her to post a review, Lana wrote that she only reviews if a story changes how she feels emotionally, "I post reviews whenever a story makes me cry or feel insanely happy. It's weird but I do. To me, a story has to change the way the reader feels" (Interview #2, 8/14/16). Ashling echoed that theme while responding to the same question, writing:

> Many of the reviews are very positive as people enjoy looking at the perspective of the character and how they're feeling and I think people relate to these feelings as well. Any reviews I have received for these kind of stories have been great, people enjoying how I had written the relationship between two characters and how they react to certain situations. I believe that by writing these stories it helps people (Interview #3, 8/29/2015).

The positive nature of fan fiction reviews has been explored in recent research, and readers on this site tend to provide "…supportive comments on the text rather than negative responses" and that this support "…generates a sense of kinship and contributes to the positive atmosphere of the community" (Campbell et al, 2016, p. 697). The encouraging community that interacts on this

site, through their open dialogue and approving reviews, creates a virtual space where writers and readers can interact with LGBT issues/themes for exploration and understanding.

Mc Dermott and Roen (2012) report that researchers have reached a consensus that a teenager's sexuality is not a risk factor in and of itself, but the negative reactions from the environment: peers, family, schools and churches are a more significant contributor to personal distress. The interactions around www.fanfiction.net, for these participants, allowed for positive interactions and support regarding LGBT issues. In reading Ashling's sweet romances, Tasha's gender-bending humor, and Lana's stories recovery from trauma, these participants explored controversial themes that are often outside of the socially accepted norm. Within this accepting virtual community, the participants were given the opportunity to gain deeper understanding of LGBT social concerns, a safe space to examine LGBT topics, and still feel praised and supported as writers.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the data collected in this research study was analyzed and organized around three findings: 1) literacy transactions on the fan fiction website allowed for participants' ongoing and emerging understandings of LGBT issues; 2) the anonymity of the website created a safe space which allowed for exploration of LGBT topics, and 3) the "normalization" of this exploration by the fan fiction community allowed participants to more deeply explore LGBT issues which, in turn, led to new ways of thinking for all participants and direct extensions for some participants. Each finding was introduced through the personal lens of a participant case study, so that the reader could more deeply understand how the participant interacted on the site, and what the experience meant to them with greater depth. Getting to know Ashling, Tasha, and Lana's personal stories, and reading their posted fictions allows for the reader to see the significance that these interactions

had on their own lives on and off screen. Following each case study was an exploration of one of the three findings, supported by the survey, interview, and writings by the participants in the study, to triangulate the data, demonstrate the commonality of the findings across the participant pool, and connect it directly with current research. This analysis demonstrated the power of virtual writing for students, not just for honing their writing skills, but also how the virtual community that they interact with allows for them to learn and understand issues that they may not have experienced in their off screen lives, in a private, safe space. The privacy on the site, with layers of profile names and shield for personal information, allows for the teens to take risks in their writing, reviewing, and reading, instead of feeling boxed into the socially accepted heteronormative world of high school. Finally, once the students interact on the site, they then receive positive, supportive comments, reviews, and encouragement to continue their work, applauding their exploration of LGBT issues. This culture encourages the participants to continue to interact on the site, allowing for further acceptance of diversity, which may not happen in their real lives. The findings fit in a seamless circle, the participants feel that the privacy allows them to explore LGBT topics without risk, and then they get positive feedback, which motivates them to interact more, learning from the writers and the fictions about marginalized experiences in the LGBT world, expanding their understandings and acceptance. If educators could embrace virtual interactions as a part of building a positive culture in a school setting, imagine the possibilities and variety of topics that could be explored to make our schools safer for our students, and truly make schools a special place for everyone.

CHAPTER 5- DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In chapter one, my purpose was to show how the fan fiction related to the television show *Glee* had relevance in the English classroom. On the website www.fanfiction.net, teenagers read, write, and review frequently and at length, with a level of enthusiasm that every English teacher would strive to emulate in the classroom. That chapter reviewed the passionate fan base of the programs storylines, and comparing the virtual writer's circles/networks on this fan site to the more traditional writing cycle utilized in a traditional classroom, with support from current research. I also explained how my experiences in reading the revealing, often emotional fan fiction in that genre led me to formulate my research question. In chapter two, I provided connections to theoretical frameworks and past research that support the significance of this study with an emphasis on the work on New Literacies by the New London Group (1996) that discussed the concept of writing as "design." This research expanded the concept of what "writing" can look like, to include visual arts, drama, online writing, and multimedia presentations, as opposed to traditional pen and paper writing. This chapter also introduced research specifically on digital literacies and virtual writing communities, to make supported connections between best practice and the writing practices explored in this research study.   Also included in chapter two, was a review of the studies conducted regarding online experiences as socio-identity practice through the work of Black (2005), Thomas (2006 and 2011), and Lewision and Heffernan (2008). Chapter three described my research process and methodology, with a detailed data collection table and the explanation of the analysis, using narrative (Bell, 1988) and discourse (Gee, 1999) analysis to review and analyze the information collected from participants during the research period. Chapter four presented an analysis of three case studies with the emergent findings, to examine the importance of their writing, reading, and interacting on the site and how those interactions

connected with the lives of the participants in relation to my research question. In this chapter, I will provide a discussion of the major themes of this research as they emerged from the findings of this study, make relevant connections to existing research, suggest implications for education, present limitations of the study, and recommend areas for future research connected to this topic. This study was an in-depth examination of the following research question:

1. How might the social interactions around the literacy events on fan.fiction.net contribute to the participant's refinements in understandings, perspectives, actions and tolerance of diversity, particularly as it relates to LGBT teens and bullying, as demonstrated in their original writing as well as in their commentaries and responses to other writers?

Discussion of research question

Fanfiction.net, with its relative anonymity, affirming and encouraging community, and vast opportunities for interaction, allowed participants the opportunity to explore LGBT issues and topics that they were not comfortable sharing in classrooms which, oftentimes, do not provide safe spaces for reading and writing around these themes and topics. One brief statement from Tasha (interview #1, 7/9/2015) when asked what motivated her to write in the site was very revealing; she explained that this space was the only place where she didn't have to change the pronouns in her stories. As an educator, that one response seems to echo for me the need for ongoing research in this area. There are students in classrooms who cannot write freely, and share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, for fear of ridicule or worse. Students like Tasha have to censor themselves as they write in the classroom. The fan fiction space is the only area where they are supported and accepted enough to write creatively while expressing their world view as well as the views of others by connecting it to their writing.

The fan fiction website, www.fanfiction.net, is organized to allow members to make

choices, but not just about the writing they create; it also allows them to mentor others, co-write, give supportive feedback and interact with other writers socially. Gee and Hayes (2012) put great emphasis on this social interaction, writing that this can be extended beyond the virtual space "…including in 'real life,' so that goals are accomplished and people grow, no matter what their age" (p. 28).

The participants in this study shared that their interactions on this site, by reading, reviewing, and writing fan fiction, impacted their ideas, understandings, and even actions regarding LGBT topics. For instance, Ashling connected so strongly with the experiences she read and wrote about that she decided to start a club in her school to support LGBT students. Tasha, during one of the member check responses, wrote that she was reflecting how her writing topics were very close to her experiences with her family and how her writing explored some of her fear of their reactions. Several participants reported how the stories about anti- gay bullying provoked empathy for the victim and their experience. Rachel wrote in response to a prompt asking about her feelings after reading bullying storylines that those stories made her "… feel the pain and sadness of the bullied character, and the ongoing struggle of going to school" (Rachel, interview #3, 9/2/2015). Ashling felt that the writing explored the innermost feelings of the bullying victim, so that "…the reader gets a whole deeper level of support for them as the story progresses" (Interview #3, 8/29/2015). In reading the stories and the reviews, bullying themes were very popular, and the reviews poured in with positive support for the writer, and championing the character who was bullied in the story. After Stella's story Standing Up Against the Bully a reviewer (Linneagb, 2015) wrote "I like this. It was so good of Amy to stand up to Dave, but poor thing. Being thrown in the dumpster can't be a nice experience." The reviews act not only as affirmation of experience and provide motivation to write, but also allows the writer to feel

acceptance from a community, and get support as they are exploring their own feelings and creating an identity. Lana reported (interview #3, 9/6/2015) that she often utilized her writing to explore new sexual ideas/thoughts and to then get feedback from the fan fiction community to see whether her feelings could be accepted socially outside of the fanfiction.net community. The fictional characters in the fan world can allow participants to "…fashion new and emerging identities for themselves as they develop into adulthood" (Thomas, 2006).

Beyond exploration, the participants also utilized interaction for support and as rehearsal for issues that they may encounter in their off screen lives. The stories that demonstrated bullying behavior by families that reacted negatively to a character when they shared their sexual identity, also struck a chord with participants. Dianna, a 16-year-old participant who identified as female, (Interview #3, 9/25/2015) wrote that she had not come out to her grandparents as of yet, and she feared their reaction. The stories she reacted to the most had characters that were rejected by their loved ones, saying "It hits too close to home for possible future events." Tasha's writing, as demonstrated in her case study, strongly connects with coming out of the closet as well, with her longest story revolving the rejection of the main character's past family contrasting with the accepting warmth of the new parents. The dual experience of her transgender character appears to be a direct interpretation of Tasha's greatest fears about coming out to her conservative family vs. the dream world of what she would like that experience to be like in a perfect world. Being able to enjoy a free space to explore, receive positive support, and the ability to interact around LGBT topics that are of personal high interest, allowed the participants in this study to have experiences that refined their understandings and acceptance of LGBT diversity.

Connections to existing research

After examining the data collected and reflecting on existing research, this study had connections to three primary concepts: 1) the fan fiction site in this research was an "affinity space" (Gee, 2010) 2) the refinement in participants' understandings and acceptance of LGBT issues/topics confirmed Queer theory, and 3) the Vygotskian theory and research around the zone of proximal development connects directly with the peer support/interaction that the participants experienced in this study. In this next section, I will provide an explanation of these concepts and link it to the data collected in this study.

Affinity spaces.

Affinity spaces (Gee & Hayes, 2010) are virtual or real life places where members interact with each other around a shared interest or common activity and where informal learning takes place. The website that was featured in this research matches that definition exactly, as the participants visited the site to read, write, and review writing centered around their shared interest, the television show *Glee*, and the homosexual pairings of characters on that show. The members of a fan fiction site have several ways to locate stories and communities within the site so as to pinpoint literacy events that directly match their topic of passion. They can screen the stories by character or topic, or join specific forums that feature the relationships that they are interested in for writing topics.

The interaction on affinity spaces is reciprocal in nature, participation, feedback and response is essential to the experience. The community in this study demonstrated that level of interaction as they interacted around the literacy events in the space. The writing process on this site, as collected in the participants' data also supported the idea that the website is an affinity space as it revolved around "sharing transformative works with other participants, who serve as an active and interactive audience for these creations" (Curwood et al, 2013). As the findings in this

study demonstrated, the feedback in this affinity space does not merely improve writing, but instead contributed to expanding understandings of diversity for the participants. In Thomas's (2006) article, Fan fiction online: Engagement, critical response and affective play through writing, he references the effect that a fan fiction affinity space can give to a member, writing:

> The online spaces devoted to fan fiction provide more than spaces for writing; they provide a supportive community for many young people (in this instance, many adolescent girls) to express themselves and play with the texts they enjoy without fear of negativity or exclusion because of issues such as gender (2006)

An experience in an affinity space is powerful and impactful to the participants, and as reflected in this study, the members' interaction on that site altered them personally. This research supports the idea that … human learning becomes deep and often life changing, when it is connected to a nurturing affinity space" (Gee & Hayes, 2012). For the participants in this study, the interaction on fanfiction.net, a supportive affinity space, allowed them to safely explore LGBT issues and topics, which allowed them to gain understanding of LGBT experiences, and led to new ways of thinking that extended into their off screen lives.

Queer theory.

In the 1990's theorists began using the word "Queer" with more regularity, and the resulting perspective of "Queer Theory" centered on "identifying and contesting the discursive and cultural markers found within both the dominant and marginal identities and institutions which prescribe and reify 'heterogendered' understandings and behavior" (Cohen, 1997, p. 438). As an extension for Critical Race Theory, Queer theory looks at the social construction of sexuality and the distribution of power within different sexual categories, and the social structure that values heterosexuality as the norm. Extending the theory into a curricular lens, "queer curriculum

theorists and practitioners are interested in interrupting heteronormative thinking" (Sumara & Davis, 1999) through reading, writing, and interaction.

In this study, participants interacted with literacy events that were centered on LGBT/Queer topics with bullying themes, which examine an imbalance of power connected with the heteronormative nature of current society. As they participated on the site, the writers in this study stretched the boundaries regarding sexuality through their reading and writing. As they challenged those norms, their own personal viewpoints regarding diversity were changed, with participants expressing that they had become more aware of the challenges that LGBT teenagers go through, and were more accepting/understanding regarding those issues. Through the interaction, they were able to probe into sensitive material that they may not have otherwise encountered or experienced. Blackburn and Buckley (2005) value this style of interaction, expressing that students "need to discuss the awkward, the different, and the new so that all students get opportunities to learn about the range of gender and sexual identities that constitute everyone's world" (p. 204). This interaction or interruption to heteronormative thinking "…becomes an important way to broaden perception, to complexify cognition, and to amplify the imagination of learners" (Sumara and Davis, 1999, pg.202). As experienced by the participants in this research, writing, reading, and interacting with peers regarding LGBT topics, altered their thoughts and understandings about diversity, which connects with the Queer curriculum theoretical research.

Zone of proximal development

Moll (1992), in the book <u>Vygotsky and Education: Instructional Implications and Applications of Sociohistorical Psychology,</u> explained that Vygotsky felt that social interaction and culture stimulates mental activity and produces higher level thinking particular only to

humans. The Zone of Proximal Development theory developed by Vygotsky reflected the effect that an adult or higher level peers may have on a child while learning a new task. He believed that the social interaction between peers or adults can scaffold learning and impact the development of a child. In this study, the peer interaction around the literacy events on www.fanfiction.net, allowed for participants to refine their understandings and acceptance of diversity as it relates to LGBT issues.

If we applied Vygotskian theory onto behavior (Diaz, 1992), social interaction with peers would modify/improve social behavior, as it did in this study. Diaz gave us two terms in reference to behavior; self-control and self-regulation. Self-control is when a child complies with an external directive in a stimulus response manner, i.e. "Stop that". Self- Regulation is when a child can internalize his behavior and adapt it to changes in his surroundings. Diaz connects these levels of development with Vygotsky's stages of cognitive development, because Vygotsky describes the internalization of learning to be connected with the demonstration with adult or higher level peer guidance. In response to the findings in this study, I assert that as the members of the fan fiction site interact around the LGBT themes literacy events with fellow writers, the interaction scaffolds their understanding of social behavior from a self-control stage (i.e. not writing sexuality themed review because of negative community response) to a self- regulatory stage, where the member understands different views and may create their fan fiction stories to encompass that understanding.

Implications for Education

From my perspective as an educator, as the findings in this study emerged, I had to allow myself to think about possible applications/extensions in the educational world of school and schooling. As I read the transcripts of interviews extolling the positivity that the participants found

on the site, the amount of writing that occurred, and the boundless motivation to interact with literacy events (whether writing, reading, or reviewing), I kept asking myself the question "how can we get that level of excitement and satisfaction into school writing?" Obviously, fans writing about their favorite television show is different than students writing an assignment for a class. However, the space itself, and how participants interact on it could be replicated in the writing classroom. Gee and Hayes (2014), wrote an article comparing affinity spaces to traditional school classrooms and found fourteen aspects of difference in the school culture that could minimize students' motivation to write. Their comparison of aspects such as having a shared purpose, multi-age interaction, shared knowledge, audience response, co-operation among participants, value on producing content, encouraged mentoring/teaching and letting those roles be reciprocal, all are demonstrated in an affinity space like a fan fiction writing website, which is inherent motivation for more writing that is not replicated in the public school system. English educators and teachers could examine studies on fan fiction, to try and incorporate these virtual writing circles into their classrooms; changing the concept of teachers holding all of the knowledge and being the sole judge of student writing. Shifting the focus from writing for grades, and instead valuing the production of students' work, could change how students look at school based writing. As educators, we need to mirror these communities that "…provide spaces for exploring, discovering and celebrating the strengths of individuals as they play together to create a culture that ultimately values writing, narrative, and story" (Thomas, 2006).

School climate/acceptance of diversity

Another implication connected with the findings in this study would be incorporating the acceptance of diversity that occurred with these participants into the public school system. Our schools have many programs/activities/practices that emphasize heterosexual relationships;

Homecoming Kings and Queens, dances that encourage male/female dating, class "couples," and Sadie Hawkins events are just some examples of the heteronormative nature of the public high school. Blackburn and Smith (2010) assert that "Nearly every school in the Unites States is heteronormative; that is, they are based on the concept that heterosexuality is normal and homosexuality is not" (p. 626). The limitless virtual world that these participants engage in on Fanfiction.net allows them to find a more open minded, accepting audience for positive feedback. Perhaps if educators allowed students to explore virtual writing connected with their classes, they could have the opportunity to get a wider pool of feedback and some anonymity that would allow room for exploration and creativity. Writing LGBT fan fiction does help LGBT students by providing "…a medium for exploring these issues and for seeing themselves reflected in texts which might otherwise marginalize them" (Lammers et al, 2012), it could also help students that feel marginalized for numerous other reasons, and the fan fiction world is wide enough to find areas that would interested those students and support feeling more accepted. The participants in this study reported that the writing they engaged in on the fan fiction site around LGBT topics did allow them to become more accepting of diversity and reflective about LGBT topics and issues. Sumara and Davis (1999) wrote about opportunities for "interrupting" heteronormative thinking, like the participants in this study did as they interacted on the site, and they believed that the interruptions "assist in the important work of eliminating homophobia and heterosexism in society, but they also create some conditions for the human capacity for knowing and learning to become expanded." When considering the recent proposed legislation controversy with LGBT bathroom policies in public schools, educators may need to explore options and ideas suggested to interrupt heteronormative thinking for students, as they move forward into a more accepting future.

Limitations

Although the data collected in this study supported that interactions around literacy events on the website www.fanfiction.net did contribute to alterations in understanding and tolerance of diversity, specifically as it related to LGBT topics, there are limitations to the scope of this research. One limitation is that the research was virtual in nature, so this study was undertaken with the assumption that the participants' demographic data was factual. Although the respondents, who all reported that they were 16-17-year-old females, expressed themselves in ways that would be indicative of a teenage girl and there was not any data indicating that the information was incorrect, it is possible that they could be older/younger or a different gender. Another limitation would be the innate motivation of the participants in this study. As I needed prolific writers as participants to really examine their work, all had high interest in interactions on this site around literacy events. It is unknown whether similar refinements to understandings would be similar with participants that did not have an interest in writing and reading, or an interest in writing about LGBT themes.

Future Research

This study is centered around literacy interactions on a virtual site on LGBT topics, which is narrow in scope, but future research could extend the findings from this study. The idea of interrupting heteronormative thinking in the public school system and the possible effect that it could have on students' acceptance of diversity, which Blackburn and Smith (2010) have written about could indicate areas for extension into educational research. If a text was read in a classroom that had LGBT characters or an anti-gay bullying incident in it, and then the students interacted by writing, reading, and reviewing fan fiction about it anonymously, the possibility of refining understandings and acceptance of diversity directly in the classroom experience would be significant for educators concerned with creating a more positive school environment. Blackburn

and Smith valued the interruption of heteronormativity in the classroom writing: "We consider it imperative to add to such efforts (LGBT –themed literature and curricula) by combating heteronormativity and considering intersectionality" (2010, p. 633), so further research in the classroom with LGBT fan fiction literacy events would be a logical extension area.

Another area of research could include the motivational effects of the reviews on the fan fiction site and the utilization of the fan fiction space as a writer's community/circle. The amount of instantaneous feedback regardless of the content (i.e. compliments vs. constructive feedback) was mentioned by my participants as a motivating factor in their writing, and utilizing this site/model in the classroom for teen writers might allow for more interest with the peer interaction. Lammers, Curwood, and Magnifico touched on this extension topic in their article Toward an affinity space methodology: Considerations for literacy research by writing "Because adolescents' involvement in these online global, multimodal literacies draws on school learning and transforms it in active, participatory ways. We argue that research on affinity spaces and new literacies is critically important to literacy educators" (Lammers et al, 2012). When students have limitless options for virtual writing spaces outside of the classroom, educators need to research options to bring that into the current school curriculum to echo the experience that students find motivating. In Writing in the Wild (2013), they said "We argue that the contemporary tools and spaces for writing that are available to youths are essential for their achievement and engagement." (Curwood et al) and I believe this is an important extension for future research.

Conclusion

This experience with the study participants has been an eye-opening, life-altering event for me as a researcher as well as a school administrator. A teenage girl posting a short fiction story about characters that she liked on a TV show would seem like a trivial action. However, what I

have learned in examining the literacy practices of these participants is that the interaction on this site has changed their perspectives on LGBT topics significantly. Not only were they motivated to read and write more often, expanding their abilities to create their designs, but by participating on this site, they become more accepting and tolerant members of society. If research in this area is continued, the extensions for the classroom could impact the culture in public schools for the future, reducing bullying incidents, and creating adults that are more open to differences in peers, seeing and accepting viewpoints that may differ from their own. If this learning of acceptance is happening only in out-of-school virtual settings, we need to replicate that in the classroom as well, because "If our goal is to prepare students for the 21st century, then we need to consider what we can learn from the kinds of writing experiences that today's youth have in online affinity spaces" (Curwood et al, 2013).

APPENDIX A: *GLEE* FAN FICTION ADVERTISEMENT

Do you participate in writing, posting, or reviewing *Glee* fan fiction on www.fanfiction.net?

Are you a high school student between 14-18 years old?

Would you be interested in participating in a research study that explores *Glee* fan fiction writing, LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgendered) bullying issues, and understandings/tolerance of diversity?

If you would like more information or are interested in participating, please contact me at the following address

phdglee2014@gmail.com

Mandy Stewart –Wayne State University Doctoral Student

Study Information: The goal of this study is to explore how *Glee* fan fiction participants socially interact around the writing on the site and how it might relate to feelings about LGBT teens and bullying.

To participate in this study you must create and post *Glee* fan fiction actively on the site www.fanfiction.net. If you are interested in participating in this study, you should contact me via email address phdglee2014@gmail.com or through the email message on fanfiction.net under the profile PhDGlee2014 and I will email you additional information regarding the study and a questionnaire to complete and return

If you are selected to participate in the study you will be asked to:

- Share your current fan fiction stories, as well three months of archived postings, which are currently publically available on www.fanfiction.net

- Participate in three interviews (through Private Message or email) that will ask you about your writing, interactions on the site, and additional questions about your experiences.

- Completion of the questionnaire

    o **You will be compensated for your time.**

APPENDIX B: [BEHAVIORAL] RESEARCH INFORMED CONSENT
[Behavioral]Documentation of Adolescent Assent Form
(ages 14-17)

Title: Digital Literacies and "Glee": The role of fan fiction writing and virtual social commentary in response to bullying themes with adolescent writers

Study Investigator: Mandy Stewart

Why am I here?
This is a research study. Only people who choose to take part are included in research studies. You are being asked to take part in this study because you actively write and post Glee fan fiction on the www.fanfiction.net website. Please take time to make your decision. Talk to your family about it and be sure to ask questions about anything you don't understand.

Why are they doing this study?
This study is being done to find out how participating and interacting with *Glee* fan fiction and other fan fiction writers may affect personal understandings, perspectives, or tolerance of diversity.

What will happen to me?
In this study, the researcher will read/examine your postings from the last 3 months and during the 3 month research period. You will also fill out a questionnaire about you and your fan fiction participation. Also, there will be three interviews, done through email (utilizing the email function on the www.fanfiction.net website), that will take less than an hour to complete. This will ask further questions about your interactions on www.fanfiction.net, your writing and experiences. The first interview will ask about how you utilize the site, how you interact with participants, and what you think of the writers, reviewers, and social connections on the site related to *Glee* fan fiction. The second interview asks about your personal author experiences, original writing, reviews written and received, along with your interactions with other participants on the site related to *Glee* fan fiction. The last interview will ask about possible reflections/connections to real life experiences, understandings/perspectives on issues related to *Glee* and LGBT tolerance and bullying issues

How long will I be in the study?
You will be in the study for 3 months, during which there will be a minimum of 4 virtual interactions through email (using the email function on www.fanfiction.net). The virtual interactions will be one survey and three emailed interviews sent to you that will take approximately 45 minutes to complete. If clarification is needed, there may be clarifying emails (maximum of 8 total virtual interactions) sent to you, which would take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Will the study help me?

- "You may not benefit from being in this study; however information from this study may help other people in the future. For example, educators who are examining

incorporating digital literacies/fan fiction into their classrooms may learn more about what motivates fan fiction writers and find links to the classroom writing. Also, educators that are looking at anti-bullying efforts and supports for students may benefit from learning about the bullying themes discussed on the site.

Will anything bad happen to me?

By taking part in this study there may be a risk that discussing your personal fan fiction writing or experiences related to your participation may cause stress. If you feel uncomfortable while answering an interview question or if you feel that you are in an unsafe situation, you should reach out to an adult or parent for support. There may also be risks involved from taking part in this study that are not known to researchers at this time.

Will I get paid to be in the study?

For taking part in this research study, you will be paid for your time and inconvenience. You will receive a $25 card if you complete all aspects of the study. All gift cards will be sent through email at the completion of the 3 month research period. You will be able to select your own gift card from the cards available on the site www.giftcertificates.com.

What about confidentiality?

Every reasonable effort will be made to keep your records (medical or other) and/or your information confidential; however we do have to let some people look at your study records. Your responses to the interview questions, writing that is posted on the site may be quoted within the study, but will be protected with a pseudonym to replace your user name.

We will keep your records private unless we are required by law to share any information. The law says we have to tell someone if you might hurt yourself or someone else. The study doctor can use the study results as long as you cannot be identified.

What if I have any questions?

For questions about the study please call Mandy Stewart at (586) 822-9831. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at (313) 577-1628.

Do I have to be in the study?

You don't have to be in this study if you don't want to or you can stop being in the study at any time. Please discuss your decision with your parents and researcher. No one will be angry if you decide to stop being in the study.

Participation:

By completing the questionnaire link provided, you are agreeing to participate in this study.

The data that you provide may be collected and used by survey monkey as per its privacy agreement.

APPENDIX C: NOTICE OF EXPEDITED APPROVAL

WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

IRB Administration Office
87 East Canfield, Second Floor
Detroit, Michigan 48201
Phone: (313) 577-1628
FAX: (313) 993-7122
http://irb.wayne.edu

NOTICE OF EXPEDITED APPROVAL

To: Mandy Stewart
College of Education
2000 Anita Ave

From: Dr. Deborah Ellis or designee _____ S. Eggly | AB · _____
for Chairperson, Behavioral Institutional Review Board (B3)

Date: April 16, 2015

RE: IRB #: 034415B3E

Protocol Title: Digital Literacies and "Glee": The Role of Fan Fiction Writing and Virtual Social Commentary in Response to Bullying Themes with Adolescent Writers

Funding Source:

Protocol #: 1503013854

Expiration Date: April 15, 2016

Risk Level / Category: 45 CFR 46.404 - Research not involving greater than minimal risk

The above-referenced protocol and items listed below (if applicable) were **APPROVED** following *Expedited Review* Category (#7)* by the Chairperson/designee *for* the Wayne State University Institutional Review Board (B3) for the period of 04/16/2015 through 04/15/2016. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals that may be required.

- Revised Protocol Summary Form (received in the IRB Office 4/9/2015)
- Protocol (received in the IRB Office 3/10/2015)
- A waiver of informed consent and written documentation of parental consent has been granted according to 45 CFR 46 116(d). This waiver satisfies: 1) risk is no more than minimal, 2) the waiver does not adversely affect the rights and welfare of research participants, 3) the research could not be practicably carried out without the waiver, and 4) providing participants additional pertinent information after participation is not appropriate.
- Behavioral Documentation of Adolescent Assent Form for Ages 14-17 (dated 4/9/2015)
- Glee Fan Fiction Advertisement
- Data Collection Tools: Appendix C - Glee Fan Fiction Participant Questionnaire and Appendix D - Semi-Structured Interview Questions

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- ° Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. You *may* receive a *"Continuation Renewal Reminder"* approximately two months prior to the expiration date; however, it is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval *before* the expiration date. Data collected during a period of lapsed approval is unapproved research and can never be reported or published as research data.
- ° All changes or amendments to the above-referenced protocol require review and approval by the IRB **BEFORE** implementation.
- ° Adverse Reactions/Unexpected Events (AR/UE) must be submitted on the appropriate form within the timeframe specified in the IRB Administration Office Policy (http://www.irb.wayne.edu//policies-human-research.php).

NOTE:

1. Upon notification of an impending regulatory site visit, hold notification, and/or external audit the IRB Administration Office must be contacted immediately.
2. Forms should be downloaded from the IRB website at **each** use.

*Based on the Expedited Review List, revised November 1998

APPENDIX D: *GLEE* FAN FICTION PARTICIPANT QUESTIONAIRE

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* 1. What is your Fan Fiction Username?

[   ]

* 2. What is your age?

○ 13 or younger

○ 14

○ 15

○ 16

○ 17

○ 18+

3. What is your gender? (This question is optional)

○ Male

○ Female

○ Transgender

○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

4. What type of School do you attend?

○ Public Middle School/Junior High

○ Public High School

○ Private Middle School/Junior high

○ Private High School

○ Charter School

○ Alternative School

○ Homeschool

Other (please specify) [   ]

* 5. How long have you been an active Fan Fiction member?

○ less than a year

○ 1-2 years

○ 2-4 years

○ 4+ years

* 6. How often do you visit www.fanfiction.net? (choose the option closest to your usage)

○ Daily

○ Multiple times a week

○ Weekly

○ bi-monthly

○ monthly

○ A few times a year

○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

* 7. How often do you post *Glee* fan fiction on the site? (choose the option closest to your usage)

○ daily

○ weekly

○ monthly

○ a few times a year

○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

8. Who are your favorite characters on *Glee?*

[   ]

* 9. How often do you post reviews on other *Glee* fan fiction stories? (choose the option closest to your usage)

○ daily

○ weekly

○ monthly

○ a few times a year

○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

Done

APPENDIX E: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following interview questions will be separated into three interviews, with the intent of a possible follow up interview to clarify any information given. The interviews are semi-structured, allowing for subsequent probes that may be needed to explore the participants' responses.

First Interview:

These questions will explore participants motivations for utilizing the site, how they interact on the site, and what their perceptions are of the writers' reviewers and social connections on the site www.fanfiction.net.

- Describe the website www.fanfiction.net and how you interact on it.
    - Probes: What inspires you to post on the site? What do you do more often: Write or review? Why? How do you decide what to write about? What motivates you to read a post?
- Describe the interactions you have with other fan fiction participants.
    - Probes: What ways do participants interact with each other (i.e. email, PM, group chat)? What is your favorite way and why? How would you describe you and your fellow writers on fan fiction (i.e. personality traits, what you have in common, what are your differences). How many participants do you interact with on a regular basis?
- What do you think motivates other fan fiction writers to post reviews?
    - Probes: Do all writers review? How do people choose what to review?
- Describe from beginning to end, the process of creating and posting a story on the site.

- o Probes: What do you see on *Glee* that inspires you to write? How long does it take you to write? What about the process do you enjoy the most and why? What part of the process is the most difficult and why?

➢ In what ways do fan fiction participants socially interact?

- o Probes: What do participants talk about? What methods do they use to communicate (email, pm, blog, group chat, personal calls)?

Second Interview:

This interview will focus on author experiences, their original writing, any reviews they have written or received, and the interactions with other participants on the site related to *Glee* fan fiction.

➢ Describe your writing experiences on www.fanfiction.net?

- o Probes: How often do you write and how long have you been writing on this site? What feedback do you usually receive on your writing from participants?

➢ How would you describe your writing?

- o Probes: What is your usual writing genre (i.e. drama, romance, tragedy, etc.)? What characters or storylines inspire your writing and why? What reaction would you want a reader to have after reading your work?

➢ Describe your experiences with writing reviews on www.fanfiction.net?

- o What motivates you to post a review? Describe a typical review. What do you hope the author takes away from a review that you post?

➢ Describe the feedback that you get from participants through posted reviews.

- o Probes: What makes you value a review? Do the reviews affect your writing, and if so, in what way? Do the reviews ever affect you negatively, and if so, what are

the characteristics of those reviews? What do the reviews focus on (plot, writing, characters, personal opinions, encouragement, etc.)?

➢ In what ways do you utilize fellow participants during your fan fiction writing?

    o Probes: Do you ever co-write? Have you ever utilized other fan fiction story ideas in your writing, if so why? Have you ever read a post and then wrote a connecting piece (sequel, alternate ending, etc.)?

Third Interview:

This interview is to discover possible reflections or connections to real life experiences with the fan fiction writing, and possible adjustments to understandings or perspectives on issues related to *Glee* and LGBT tolerance and bullying issues.

➢ Describe the LGBT bullying storylines/incidents on the show *Glee.* In what ways are these storylines/incidents similar to real life experiences? In what ways are they different?

    o Probes: What storylines do you enjoy and why? What about them seems realistic and/or unrealistic? Are there storylines that you would have changed and if so, what would you have changed?

➢ Have you ever had any experiences with bullying? If so, please describe.

    o Probes: How was that situation resolved? Have you witnessed any bullying experiences and how were they resolved?

➢ Describe what you think of or feel after reading other *Glee* fan fiction that follows the LGBT bullying storylines.

- o What stories give you a positive feeling? What stories give you negative feelings? How do you want the stories to be resolved? Do you feel that the stories are comparable to real life experiences, why or why not?

➢ In what ways do you think the LGBT storylines on *Glee* inspire fan fiction writers and writing?

- o Probes: What storylines seem to be popular and why? Do the popular storylines change with the plot lines of the show? How similar or different are the fan fiction stories to the *Glee* plots?

➢ Describe the reviews that are posted in response to *Glee* fan fiction with an LGBT bullying storyline.

- o Probes: Do people post more positive or negative reviews and why? What plotlines seem to inspire reviews?

➢ Has your experience with writing and reading fan fiction affected your actions/feelings/understandings in your personal life? If so, please describe.

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ABSTRACT

DIGITAL LITERACIES AND "GLEE": THE ROLE OF FAN FICTION VIRTUAL WRITING AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY IN RESPONSE TO BULLYING THEMES WITH ADOLESCENT WRITERS

by

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As the education system turns its attention to climate, bullying, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) issues in the classroom, there is a focus on developing our student population abilities to be more accepting and tolerant of diversity. This study explored how ten students, aged 16-17, interacted with virtual literacy events on www.fanfiction.net, and how that contributed to their refinements in understandings, perspectives, actions and tolerance of diversity, particularly as it related to LGBT teens and bullying, as demonstrated in original writing as well as in commentaries and responses to other writers. As these teenagers wrote about LGBT topics in their published writing, interacted with other participants through their reviews/online messaging, and read other fan fiction stories focused on LGBT bullying storylines, it allowed participants' to have ongoing and emerging understandings of LGBT issues in an anonymous, virtual space. This study explored how the participants navigated the www.fanfiction.net site, within a virtual fan fiction community devoted to the television program *Glee*, which features LGBT bullying plots. The study participants wrote original stories and published them on the site, followed other fan fiction authors, and actively read/reviewed stories on these topics. The norms of this virtual community discourages negative commentary, while favoring interactions that encourage writers, creating an

affinity space that participants described as welcoming and supportive as they explored LGBT topics that might be perceived as offensive in the real world. With case studies on the three most prolific writers, this research demonstrates the diverse backgrounds, interests, and writing styles of fan fiction participants, even with writing focused on the same television show, and allows the reader to delve into what the experience of interacting on the site is like from the writer's perspective. In analyzing all participant data, I found that literacy transactions on the fan fiction website allowed for participants' ongoing and emerging understandings of LGBT issues, the anonymity of the website created a safe space which allowed for exploration of LGBT topics, and the positive acceptance of LGBT storylines during interactions on www.fanfiction.net gave opportunities to further explore LGBT issues/themes.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

The day I found out I had been accepted into the PhD program, I also found out I was pregnant with my first child. At first, my pregnancy seemed like a barrier, nibbling crackers to keep the nausea down during my first night classes, and trying to schedule final exams around my due date. However, as I progressed through the program, I started to understand that being a parent gave me more motivation and interest in the reading and research.

With more than 15 years in secondary education, as both a teacher and an administrator, I have experienced how easy it is to become callous regarding bullying and negative school climate. I saw home lives that were so abusive, parents that were absent or addicted, that fielding parent calls about how their children felt "unsafe" coming to school because another student was calling them names felt superficial. As a parent, that focus shifts. The center of your world becomes making your own child feel safe, secure, and able to become successful. When my child looked up at me and said "I hate school!" because another child made him feel badly, I not only wanted to protect my child, but I wondered if this negative interaction would affect how he viewed school and education. Education is key to becoming a successful adult, and those negative experiences, no matter how small, could deter your child's interest in academic success.

From that perspective, my research ideas took on new life. Researching spaces for students that are positive, safe, and encouraging, so that they can overcome negative events or experiment with literacy without fear of criticism that they may find in their own lives has importance to my experiences as a parent and educator. To ensure that we have generations of successful, educated adults, we have to remove barriers to education, both physical and socio-emotional. My work is a very small drop in the bucket, but I hope that educators keep looking for ways to support students inside and outside of the classroom.