

A Qualitative Exploration of the Experiences of Individuals Who Have Identified as LGBTQ and Who Have Homeschooled or Unschooling

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Abstract *This grounded theory study focuses on the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) students who have homeschooled or unschooled. Although some research has been done regarding the experiences of LGBTQ students attending public or private schools, this research is the first of its kind exploring the experiences of LGBTQ students who have homeschooled or unschooled. Eighteen adults, aged 18–47, who had homeschooled or unschooled for at least four years chose to participate in the study. Participants reported four main benefits of being LGBTQ and homeschooled. The benefits included: increased freedom and autonomy, escape from traditional school culture, having time for education and exploration about sexuality and gender, and increased peer support from the queer homeschooling community. The greatest challenge of being LGBTQ and homeschooled, as reported by seven participants, was the lack of resources they felt were available to them growing up. The unschooled community in particular seemed especially open to those students who were exploring their sexuality or who identified as LGBTQ.*

Keywords LGBTQ, unschooling, homeschooling

Introduction and literature review

Not much is known regarding the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) individuals who have homeschooled or unschooled. However, research has been done focusing on the experiences of LGBTQ students who have attended school (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016; Murray, 2015; Pizmony-Levy & Kosciw, 2016). Currently, there are over four million identified LGBTQ school aged individuals living in the United States (Murray, 2015). A majority of those individuals are traditionally schooled. However, there is a population of students who identify as LGBTQ and have homeschooled or unschooled. This particular research focuses on the experiences of adults who identify as LGBTQ and have been homeschooled or

unschooled.

According to Murray, “Over the past 40 years, equal rights and antidiscrimination legislation have extended an umbrella of protection to many disenfranchised groups, but efforts have failed to adequately cover the health and safety of queer youth” (2015, p. 3). Stories of LGBTQ students being bullied within private and public school settings are common (Swearer, Espelage, Vailancourt, & Hymel, 2010) and the number of LGBTQ individuals who have been victims of violent crimes have risen (Park & Mykhyalyshyn, 2016). A 2011 study by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that over 82% of LGBTQ students between the ages of 13–20 have experienced some form of verbal harassment in an educational environment, while 38% of students reported being physically harassed (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2012). The result of this harassment is multi-layered. Students who identify as LGBTQ tend to have higher truancy and drop out rates than the average school population. They also tend to have lower academic aspirations, not because of ability, but because of the ramifications of negative social and emotional experiences in school (Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010).

The purpose of this particular study is to qualitatively examine the experiences of individuals who identify as LGBTQ and who have also homeschooled or unschooled. Although the number of LGBTQ students who homeschool or unschool may be comparatively small, it is important that their experiences be documented and taken into account. This is the first academic paper of its kind that has set out to explore this topic.

Methodology

In February of 2016, I posted a call for research on Facebook and Twitter, asking for individuals who identify as LGBTQ over the age of 18, and who had also been homeschooled or unschooled, to contribute to a qualitative study focusing on their particular educational experience (see Appendix A). Twenty four individuals from the US and Canada responded, and were sent a consent form as well as the questionnaire. Eighteen individuals gave consent to participate in the study and responded to the questionnaire (see Appendix B). The sample size was small, as expected. Although approximately 3.4% of the school aged population is homeschooled or unschooled (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), the researcher estimates that 5–10% of the homeschooled population currently identifies as LGBTQ.

Idzie Desmarais, author of the blog *I'm Unschooled. Yes, I Can Write*, and a well known LGBTQ advocate within the homeschooling community hypothesizes that the percentage may be higher. She states:

In my experience with the unschooling community specifically (not

the broader homeschooling community), the percentage of children and teens identifying as LGBTQ is...closer to 20%. I've speculated that one of the reasons for this is being part of a very accepting community, with parents working off of a philosophy that's all about supporting the individual child for who they are, meaning that unschoolers are more likely to "come out" at a younger age. I'd also suspect that LGBTQ+ children, being far more likely to feel ostracized and unwelcome in school...are more likely to be pulled out and unschooled/homeschooled than their straight/cisgender counterparts (Desmarais, personal communication, June 21, 2016).

After receipt of responses, data was collected and coded using an Excel spreadsheet. In terms of methodology, the researcher came into this research with no preconceived hypotheses or notions regarding the experiences of individuals who have identified as LGBTQ and have also been homeschooled or unschooled. As of this writing, there has been no peer reviewed academic research published on the topic. The research itself was grounded in the views and responses of the participants of the study. Therefore, in terms of qualitative data analysis, this study would be considered grounded theory research (Smith, 2015).

The participants

Participants in this study ranged in age from 18–47, with the mean age of respondents being 28.7 years old. Ten participants identified as female, four identified as gender queer, one participant identified as gender context dependent, one identified as transmasculine/gender fluid and two participants identified as transgender. All participants had been homeschooled or unschooled for at least four years, with a majority of the participants stating they were homeschooled their entire lives.

The process of coming out

The average age individuals participating in the study "came out" to their parent(s) was 17.4 years old (range 13–25). In terms of reaction, 13 out of 18 participants rated their parent's reactions as supportive to semi-supportive. Reactions coded as supportive or semi-supportive included the following:

I came out at 13 after a year of unbearable anxiety, and I was indeed unschooling. They were supportive, and not surprised. My mom connected me with resources and was in the process of moving our family from a small town to a city in part to broaden my resources as a teen who was clearly a bit different. As was typical of them, they did not want to discuss my in-depth feelings on what I was going through,

but that is more an issue of family system...than me being queer.

I came out as genderqueer to my parents almost a year ago. I'd been an ally for years and they weren't surprised. I don't think they understand my gender experience but are curious about it and supportive of me changing names, pronouns, identities, and clothing as I see fit. I don't know how they'd feel about me taking HRT (Hormone Replacement Therapy).

I was eighteen when I officially came out to my parents as bisexual, although I suspect they knew long before that. I was not homeschooling at the time. They were very positive and accepting, which is how I expected (and hoped) they would react. With my mother in particular, I can see her making an effort to understand more about the LGBTQ community through her book and movie choices. We discuss news stories and social issues, and she's even come with me to anti-homophobia rallies.

Those whose reactions were coded as non-supportive reported parents who were generally more confused or shocked than outwardly unsupportive. For example, one participant reported:

The first time I tried coming out to my mum, I was probably about 16-17. I was unschooled at the time. She pretty much reacted with confusion (I was coming out about gender issues, mostly, because it was the part I felt clearer about for myself, and that was more important and thought-consuming and unhappiness-making for me). I got the impression she didn't understand at all and didn't really take it seriously. I didn't really bring it up again until I was about 19, and she took it a little better, seemed to actually listen. I've never really talked about it with anyone else in my family.

The link between homeschooling and being LGBTQ

Within the questionnaire, participants were asked "What (if any) is your relationship between choosing to homeschool and being LGBTQ?" Two participants did see a direct link:

Leaving school when I did (as well as the house I grew up in and the town I grew up in) hugely allowed me to come out to myself in the first place. I went to Not Back to School Camp and felt very supported in my questioning process through that community (both during camp

itself and maintaining those friendships/connections throughout the year), so I really doubt I would have come out to myself as a teen at all if I had stayed in public school. I think I would have stayed in denial as a coping mechanism, and I'm glad I didn't have to.

I felt I avoided a lot of social stigma and pressure (and bullying) by being homeschooled. I'm not sure if this has any effect on how comfortable I am with my queer identity now, but it's worth noting.

Most participants saw no direct relationship between homeschooling and their sexual or gender identity (i.e., generally, participants did not choose to homeschool or unschool because of their sexual or gender identity). However, two participants, although not seeing an immediate connection, stated:

I initially started homeschooling/unschooling (it started out as more structured homeschooling and became unschooling as time went on) because I was severely depressed and being atrociously bored/generally unfulfilled in school wasn't helping, but it was around the same time that I first started identifying as queer (it took me a solid two years to come out to my mom after that). So, it wasn't an explicit connection, and that depressive episode was in the context of a lifetime of mental health problems, but I also wouldn't be surprised if being a kid with a non-normative gender presentation who was starting to question their sexual identity contributed somewhat.

Unschooling feels linked to queerness in that they are both rejections of the supposedly compulsory. I (with the help of my parents) rejected compulsory schooling, and I imagine that action helped me to see rejecting compulsory heterosexuality as an option. For an unschooler, nothing necessarily has to continue on as prescribed.

Bullying, homeschooling, and school

Once considered a school based rite of passage, bullying is now considered a national epidemic. Approximately one out of every four students under the age of 18 has reported being bullied during the school year. Because of the power dynamic inherent in bullying, those who are most bullied include students of color, students who identify as LGBTQ, students with body image issues, and students with disabilities (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, Lumkin, 2014).

Although some participants within this study attended school and felt bullied there, that bullying didn't necessarily go away when they chose to homeschool. Some individuals who were homeschooled their entire lives also felt bullied. In all,

while 13 participants were coded as responding “No” to the question “Did you ever feel bullied within a homeschooled setting?” four participants were coded as a firm “Yes.” (One respondent chose not to answer the question). The responses from those who were coded as “Yes” can be found below:

Yes. Growing up, I was an in-between age in my homeschooling group. The older kids teased me for being young and I didn’t like playing with the younger kids. I have struggled with social anxiety and low self esteem in part because of overhearing older kids telling each other how unattractive and unlikeable I was. There was one person in particular who seemed to just really not like me and would say mean things to me.

I never really thought of it in terms of having been bullied, but looking back on interactions among homeschool groups and afterschool programs I was occasionally part of, I acted pretty shy and tended to get ignored or picked on basically all the time.

I didn’t, but I feel that was likely only because I was in very specifically unschooling circles by the time I came out. Up until I was about 12, my family was involved in local homeschooling groups that were largely religious, school-at-home families, and I clearly remember hearing negative things from parents there about LGBTQ people.

In retrospect, yes. Other people in my homeschool group realized that I liked girls before I really figured it out. I was branded a bad influence, lost most of my friends, would get singled out or cornered in group settings. When I was fifteen, the girl I considered my best friend (a fellow homeschooler and neighbour, so I spent a lot of time with her) would chase me and spit on me. However, at the time, I didn’t consider this to be bullying. Bullying was seen within my peer group as a “public school thing,” along with things like listening to rock music, swearing, or reading Harry Potter. Bullying was not considered to be something that homeschoolers did, so I didn’t think that what I was experiencing could be classed as bullying. So, while it was happening, I felt like I was experiencing some negative, hurtful side of having friends. I didn’t feel bullied so much as I felt confused and uncomfortable. In retrospect, I see it as bullying.

Interestingly, the above respondent did attend school for part of high school and did

not recall feeling bullied there at all. It is important to note that bullying is not just a school based issue, but also a community based issue, generally characterized by social isolation and exclusion from a community or group (LeBlank, 2001).

The benefits of being LGBTQ and homeschooled

Participants reported four main benefits of being LGBTQ and homeschooled. The benefits included: increased freedom and autonomy, escape from traditional school culture, having time for education/exploration about sexuality and gender, and increased peer support from the queer homeschooling community.

In describing the freedom/autonomy felt from being unschooled, one participant stated:

With unschooling (if you're in the right subculture, I suppose) you already have the benefit of the doubt just by being a human being, so when you say "I'm queer" or "I'm trans," people are just like... "Okay!" Public school, on the other hand, it would be like, 1) "That's horrible, why would you say that?" but also, 2) "You're too young to know/it's just a phase." Unschooling helped me believe myself (about so many things—the way I learn, the abuse I grew up with, my identity, all of it) and gave me the power to assert my identity to myself and the people around me who would be supportive.

Those who mentioned "escape" as a benefit specifically mentioned the importance of having escaped from school and its associated "straight culture." Sample participant responses included:

I think I very much got to escape what would have rapidly become a really destructive environment by leaving school right at the beginning of middle school, based on what I've heard about the high school experiences of queer friends of mine. I had transferred from public school in my aforementioned extremely conservative and homophobic town to a slightly more liberal private school for the few months of 7th grade that I completed before starting to homeschool, so I'm not entirely sure it would have been as bad as I imagine, but I think I would have wound up feeling extremely isolated at the very least. Instead, because I spent the vast majority of my time during the day online instead of in school, I was able to connect with other queer teens. I also met a number of queer teens and queer adults through the gifted education community (a large majority of involved people homeschooled or had some kind of non-traditional education going on) I was part of, and through that wound up spending a year studying

literature and math and competitive scrabble with a queer woman who was a really fantastic role model and one of the first successful real life queer adults I got to know. It meant that the vast majority of representations of queerness I ran into on a regular basis were actually quite positive, in contrast to the ones I had grown up with. I think had I stayed in school, I would have been exposed to far more negative imagery that would have made it a lot harder for me to make it through my teen years feeling like being queer was a good thing.

I think that the biggest benefit of being homeschooled and bisexual was the strength it gave me to be myself. As a homeschooler, I always knew I was different; not going to school made me grow up outside of the norm. I absolutely loved being homeschooled, and because I loved it so much, this helped me realize that being different could be a wonderful thing. So, when I started figuring out my sexuality and realized just how that would go over with my peers, my homeschooling experience helped combat the negativity. I already had experience being different, and it wasn't inherently a bad thing to be different from other people. Additionally, because I faced negativity from the homeschool group, being bisexual has made me less focused on what others think of me. I learned to ignore—or at least not be bothered by—their opinions.

Middle school sounds like hell on earth for many reasons, but in the context of this questionnaire, I'm happy I was able to explore queerness (and for that matter, everything else that came with puberty) in privacy....Also, for some strange reason....a bunch of other unschoolers I met as a kid ended up being queer too, so growing up queer seemed pretty normal in the context of my queer group.

Having time for increased exploration about sex, sexuality, and gender issues was seen as a benefit for many participants. Several participants reported investigating, through the internet, books, materials, and role models, what it meant to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer in the United States, and/or just investigating gender norms in general. Through the internet and informal gatherings, some also found queer peers and role models that became a source of support for them throughout their journey.

The challenges of being LGBTQ and homeschooled

The greatest challenge of being LGBTQ and homeschooled, as reported by seven participants, was the lack of resources they felt were available to them growing up.

Although the internet is a good source of education and support, community resources would have also been welcomed by many, especially by those who grew up in smaller towns/communities. One participant noted:

When in a small town I was unable to meet other queer teenagers. This was probably more a consequence of the town than being unschooled. From what I heard, there was one out lesbian at the local high school. I luckily had the Internet, and, upon moving to a city, a queer resource center.

Although most individuals surveyed felt that they were generally accepted by peers and adults around them, a challenge noted by four participants was the feeling of not belonging. One participant mentioned being unschooled and being gay was a “double whammy” in terms of social acceptance. This was not an unfamiliar feeling, as another participant concurred that:

I think the biggest challenge is the sense of not belonging in either community. While my parents were not religious in how they raised me, my homeschooling group (and, as a result, most of my friends) consisted of fundamentalist Christians. Unsurprisingly, my sexuality was an issue for them, and I'm no longer comfortable around the friends I grew up with. I don't belong with my homeschooling community either.... So, I'm a former homeschooler, and I'm bisexual, but I don't feel comfortable in either community. I'm too gay for the homeschooling community... but I feel like I get read as too much of a fundamentalist Christian homeschooler to fit into the LGBTQ community, too. It's like I have feet in two worlds, but each world keeps me from belonging in the other.

Attitudes towards gender and sexuality

One of the last questions asked in the survey was “How has home education shaped your attitudes towards gender and sexuality?”, and the resounding answer by all but one participant was coded as “a lot.” Many mentioned the freedom of being able to be truly oneself, and not having to worry daily about conformity (gender based/sexuality based, or otherwise). One participant, who did attend public school, stated “My public school education taught me that a heteronormative existence was the only possibility,” and reiterated the freedom she found in unschooling. Another participant expanded, by stating:

So much! I think homeschooling and unschooling first and foremost allowed me to question social norms in general. Not having to do the

thing that is supposed to completely define teenagerhood—go to school—opened up the possibility of being able to question everything else I was supposed to do. I had always leaned towards trusting my own understanding and knowledge over any that was outright handed to me, and generally questioned anything that didn't make sense, but homeschooling gave me even greater permission to do that. I had the opportunity to come to my own conclusions about the world, and gender and sexuality were part of that. The more specific stuff came later, in college, when I started taking classes in gender history. I'm not sure if I would have started identifying as trans had that not happened. I might have, but I think it would have taken much, much longer. Reading texts on the history of sexuality and gender theory once again allowed me to question the social norms that I was supposed to adhere to. If gender categories had been invented anyway, there was no need for me to define myself according to them; I could make up a new way of being. I can't say for sure if that was related to homeschooling, but I wouldn't be surprised if that ability to rapidly throw out social rules that didn't make sense to me was in some way rooted in my history of dropping out of middle school to educate myself.

Additional comments

When asked for other comments, participants in this study had important things to say. One participant wrote about the importance of mental health services for LGBTQ individuals, both schooled and unschooled:

Regardless of educational status, resources online and outside of school environments are IMPERATIVE. If it isn't safe for someone to be out, they need to have access to resources either outside their home or outside their school....Mental health resources for unschooled teens are important and can be difficult to access if one doesn't go through their parents or if one's parents are not well insured. This isn't to say that mental health resources in school systems are any better. The free confidential counseling at my city queer resource center was literally potentially life saving.

Others spoke about how thankful they were that they were homeschooled, despite the challenges:

Just that I'm glad I'm both (homeschooled and queer). While I have had some negative experiences, I feel like they've had a positive

impact overall on my life and who I've become as a person. If you gave me the opportunity to change my sexuality and/or my education, I don't think I'd change either. I credit that to my parents and their choices for my schooling/upbringing.

Conclusion

Despite the small sample size of the study, which is an obvious limitation, it is important to collect and analyze the insights of LGBTQ young adults who were also homeschooled or unschooled. Although there is literature on the experiences of students who identify as LGBTQ attending private or public school (Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010), this study is the first of its kind to examine the experiences of LGBTQ students who are also homeschooled or unschooled. The unschooled community in particular seemed especially open to those students who were exploring their sexuality or who identified as LGBTQ (Desmarais personal communication, June 21, 2016).

However, as noted, not all participants in this study felt supported and embraced by the homeschool or unschool communities. Four participants reported feeling clearly bullied and unaccepted by other homeschool or unschoolers, a feeling that is experienced by those enrolled in public or private schools as well. Although a benefit of being homeschooled or unschooled and LGBTQ was reported as being able to escape a school environment and its associated "straight culture," the homeschooled and unschooled communities also have a long way to go in terms of total acceptance of individuals who identify as LGBTQ.

The comment about increased mental health and supportive health services for those who identify as LGBTQ was echoed by many, especially those participants in small towns or rural environments where support services are rare. In terms of statistics, it has been reported that LGBTQ individuals are three times more likely to experience a mental health condition as compared to individuals who identify as heterosexual (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2016). It is imperative that communities take this to heart, opening more mental health and supportive health services specifically for the LGBTQ population.

Overall, however, individuals who were homeschooled or unschooled and LGBTQ reported positive experiences. Many felt that the freedom and autonomy inherently present in many homeschooled and unschooled environments made it easier to explore one's gender identification and sexual preference openly and without judgment. Others stated that because they were homeschooled or unschooled, they got to escape heteronormative school culture, and also got a chance to embrace who they were in a less pressured way.

It is so important to continue to study the experiences of individuals who identify as LGBTQ, especially within the realm of education. Educational alternatives for individuals within this population should also be explored. For

some, learning environments specifically geared to LGBTQ students and their allies may be the answer. Models of these learning environments are seen in the US with The Pride School (Atlanta, Georgia), The Harvey Milk School (New York) and The Alliance School (Milwaukee, Wisconsin). Democratic schools may also be safe spaces for students who identify as LGBTQ. For others, homeschooling or unschooling may be a viable alternative option to private or public schools; and making the choice to homeschool or unschool may decrease the physical, emotional, or social discomfort experienced by some LGBTQ students within a school environment.

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Appendix A: Call for Participants

Call for research participants:

My name is Gina Riley Ph.D. I am a clinical professor, educational psychologist and researcher. I primarily research issues related to homeschooling, unschooling, self determination, and intrinsic motivation. A complete list of my work can be found at: <http://chestnyc.academia.edu/ginariley>. Currently, I am writing an academic article about individuals who have homeschooled/unschooled and also identify themselves as L/G/B/T/Q. It is a qualitative study, open to participants' ages 18 or older. If you are interested in participating in this study, please send me an email at professorginariley@gmail.com and I will send you a consent form and questionnaire. Feel free to forward this call for research participants to anyone who may be interested. Thank you.

Appendix B: Questionnaire

- Name (optional)
- Gender:
- Age:
- Current Occupation:
- Personal pronoun you prefer to be referred to as:
- How long had you been homeschooled or unschooled? Between what ages?
- At what age did you “come out” to your parent(s)? Were you homeschooling at that time? What was their reaction?
- What (if any) is your relationship between choosing to homeschool and being L/G/B/T/Q?
- Did you ever feel bullied within a private or public school setting?

LGBTQ...Homeschooled or Unschooled

- Did you ever feel bullied within a homeschooled setting?
- What is the biggest benefit of being homeschooled and L/G/B/T/Q?
- What is the biggest challenge of being homeschooled and L/G/B/T/Q?
- Did you feel accepted by peers as a child/teen? Did you feel accepted by other adults you came into contact with?
- How has your education shaped your attitudes towards gender identification and sexuality?
- Is there anything else you want to add about the experience of being L/G/B/T/Q and homeschooled?



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