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## Reading the Rainbow: Exploring the Educational Experiences of LGBTQ+ Students

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Ashley R. Stroud entitled "Reading the Rainbow: Exploring the Educational Experiences of LGBTQ+ Students." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Teacher Education.

Judson Laughter, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Susan Groenke, Stergios Botzakis, Mitsunori Misawa

Accepted for the Council:

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Reading the Rainbow: Exploring the Educational Experiences of LGBTQ+ Students

A Dissertation Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Ashley Renee Stroud

May 2023

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to my participants and to the Queer community. To those of you who have ever felt ostracized and unsafe, this is for you.

## Acknowledgements

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## **Abstract**

Research shows that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, Queer and questioning plus (LGBTQ+) youth are at high risk for bullying and violent victimization, poor mental health, alcohol and other drug use, and poor academic performance. According to the 2019 GLSEN school climate survey, LGBTQ+ students reported hearing hostile remarks, experiencing harassment and assault, feeling unsafe because of personal characteristics, and being subjected to discriminatory policies. The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to understand how secondary students experience school environments and how their teachers can be supportive and affirming of their diverse identities. The following research questions guided this study: 1) What stories do LGBTQ+ students tell about their educational experiences? 2) What strategies do LGBTQ+ students use to survive in secondary educational environments?

The findings of this study revealed several themes that inform how teachers can work to develop classrooms as safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students. The implications of this study emphasize the importance of training teachers to develop strategies that affirm all students, regardless of their identities. Teachers should be familiar with a brief history of LGBTQ+ identities, should be trained in the correct, affirming language to use with LGBTQ+ students, and be willing to address macro- and microaggressions in the school environment. These implications provide guidance for teacher preparation programs and in-service professional development to develop explicit strategies to affirm diverse student genders and sexual orientations by meeting students where they are and explicitly addressing identity-based bullying.

*Keywords:* LGBTQ+, Queer theory, secondary students, safe space, narrative inquiry



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## Chapter One: Introduction

In recent years, national news media have reported on the progress towards equality for the LGBTQ+ community. This decades-long struggle includes the 2015 landmark case of *Obergefell v. Hodges*, when the Supreme Court lifted the ban on same sex marriage licenses, and more recently in 2020, when the Supreme Court ruled that sexual orientation and gender identity are federally protected under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. While such federal workplace protection provides a safety net, there is still much work to be done as sexual minorities and transgender and gender non-conforming folks continue to experience identity-based discrimination and various unsafe environments. Moreover, interactions with other exclusionary systems continue to marginalize oppressed groups and, therefore, must be challenged, as cis-normativity and the heteropatriarchy create hostile work and learning environments for vulnerable populations. Specifically, individuals who are LGBTQ+ remain at risk for bullying and harassment as a result of their identities.

While institutions must take responsibility for all forms of exclusion and hostility, LGBTQ+ students and communities must be understood beyond the lens of victimization. Therefore, this project looks at the experiences of students to learn how teachers can best support students with diverse sexuality and gender identities in educational settings in order to learn how to create optimal classroom environments to affirm all student identities.

Teachers possess great power in their roles as “dispensers of knowledge and evaluators...of what students have learned” (Thayer-Bacon, 2003, p. 246). Teachers plan, implement, and assess student progress, as well as develop relationships with students to help them see and to reach their potential. Not only do teachers wield great power over student

learning and future success, but teachers are responsible for the safety and the well-being of their students. Teachers hold immense influence in affecting the quality of students' daily lives as they monitor and witness student behaviors toward their peers as well as how other teachers and administrators treat students (Thayer-Bacon, 2003). As a result, teachers and administrators must work on school supports to create an inclusive and safe environment for all students.

Specifically, teachers must create a supportive classroom environment for LGBTQ+ students that promotes positive learning and identity affirmation.

This dissertation follows a traditional layout with a five-chapter structure. Chapter One provides an overview of the study and the study objectives. This introductory chapter includes the background of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the significance of the study, and the definition of terms. Chapter Two covers the review of the literature where I describe the search descriptions, review the research, and outline the conceptual and theoretical framework. The literature review is organized by themes. Chapter Three is the methodology chapter where I discuss in depth the research design including guiding research questions, the interview protocol and setting, the participants and their recruitment as well as data collection and data analysis. In Chapter Four, I present my findings, and in Chapter Five, I discuss these findings and the implications of this study. I conclude with suggestions for future research.

### **Study Objectives**

While much research has focused on the construction of Queer theory and the typologies of young adult literature with Queer content and LGBTQ+ themes used in the classroom (e.g., Cart & Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins & Cart, 2018; Jimenez, 2015), few studies address how students who identify as LGBTQ experience secondary learning environments or what students believe

the teacher's role is in affirming diverse sexual and gender identities. This project aims to explore how Queer students navigate school. Specifically, I am interested in the student perspective on what teachers can do to affirm a range of identities and experiences that have traditionally been devalued and diminished. The purpose of this study was to understand how LGBTQ+ students experience school environments and how teachers can be supportive and affirming of their diverse identities.

Therefore, this study was designed to center the voices of students with the goal of learning what teachers can do to best support their needs. In order to listen to students, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What stories do LGBTQ+ students tell about their educational experiences?
2. What strategies do LGBTQ+ students use to survive in educational environments?

A study exploring the experiences of people who identify as LGBTQ+ naturally lends itself to a study of experience and consciousness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) and the lens (Preissle, 2008) of qualitative research. Therefore, this phenomenon can be understood to a greater degree by using a qualitative approach (Moret, 2018).

The qualitative strategy of narrative inquiry (Creswell, 2011) helped reveal a better understanding of the stories LGBTQ students share and what strategies they use to navigate their educational experiences. Narrative inquiry also allowed for participants to reflect upon and to theorize what the teacher's role is to support and to affirm diverse identities of students who identify as LGBTQ+. Further, the interview guide reflects how each interview question aimed to address the respective research question.

Another reason the qualitative approach was beneficial is because of the nature of interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Strauss & Corbin 1998). In order to ascertain the influence of identity in the secondary classroom, students must be asked to reflect on learning and their learning environment. Observing and interviewing participants are effective methods to learn more about educational trends among LGBTQ+ students (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). For this project, the focus was participant interviews.

In short, this study sought a deeper understanding of what safe(r) spaces for LGBTQ+ students look like. Thus, in order to set the context for this study, I next define key terms from the research literature and present a framework for safe(r) spaces in the classroom. Following the definitions of terminology, I then provide my perspectives as a researcher and a statement of my positionality.

### **Defining LGBTQ+**

Acronyms for the gay community have varied over time, whether with the order of the letters or even which letters should be included. Many authors use LGBT, LGB, or LGBTQIA2S to describe specifically how their research subjects identify, so variation in usage often reflects those differences. For this project, I will be using LGBTQ+ to include a wide range of gender and sexual minorities and to describe the community as a whole. First, I will define what I mean by LGBTQ+, then a safe space, and finally, I will explain why these concepts are connected and how teachers can do more to respond to and optimize success for sexual and gender diversity.

According to GLAAD, formerly known as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, *sexual orientation* is the correct term for an individual's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex. LGBTQ+, or

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Plus, is a shortened version of multiple acronyms used to represent diverse sexual orientations and gender minorities (DSG). This includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, and heterosexual or straight orientations. The term “sexual preference” (as opposed to orientation) is offensive and should not be used as it suggests that being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is voluntary and can be cured. People do not need to have had specific sexual experiences to know their orientation.

While heterosexual is a term used to describe people whose enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction is to people of the opposite sex, homosexual is an outdated clinical term that can be considered offensive and derogatory. Prior to the word homosexuality, sexual relationships between men were labeled as sodomy, after the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

In the book of Genesis (Chapter 19), the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were considered depraved. As a result of this wickedness, God rains sulfur and fires down. This divine judgment of fire created a longstanding association of gay sexual activity as criminal. “Sodomites” were harshly punished with public executions including being burnt at the stake to reflect the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah or being torn to pieces by dogs (Crompton, 1976). Even though gay relationships are never explicitly stated as the reason these cities were destroyed, conservative Christians perceive these types of relationships as deviant and immoral. The word “homosexuality” did not appear in any translation of the Bible until 1946, when a new version combined *malakos* and *arsenokoitai* into one word and ultimately began the trend of bigoted translations. Other editions translate the same two words as “sexual perverts,” “catamites” and

“sodomites,” or “male prostitutes” and “homosexual offenders.” These negative biblical uses and subsequent connotations do not allow for homosexual to be a neutral term.

Furthermore, homosexual is problematic because it contains the word “sex.” This places an added emphasis on sex even though sexuality is only one facet of humanity. “Homo” has also been utilized as a slur. The word has been used to pathologize the community, and until 1973, the American Psychological Association considered homosexuality a psychological disorder. Homosexual is also very clinical and was the term cited in the International Classification of Diseases of the World Health Organization, which did not remove “homosexuality” until 1990.

During this project, I used a multitude of terms regarding identities. These terms and labels vary from person to person and over time. For clarity, I also included relevant definitions outside of the acronym that aid in understanding some of the terms and labels. For exploring minority identities in pedagogical contexts, here is what I mean by each term:

- Lesbian: A noun used to describe a woman whose enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction is to other women. Some lesbians may prefer to identify as gay (adj.), as sapphic, or as a gay woman.
- Gay: The adjective used to describe people whose enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attractions are to people of the same sex (e.g., gay man, gay people).  
Sometimes lesbian (n. or adj.) is the preferred term for women.
- Bisexual, Bi: A person who has the capacity to form enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attractions to those of the same gender or to those of another gender. People may experience this attraction in differing ways and degrees over their lifetime.



- Transgender, Trans: An adjective and umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. There are a wide variety of terms to describe diverse gender identities that may or may not fall under the trans umbrella including non-binary, genderqueer, genderflux, agender, androgynous, and gender non-confirming.
- Queer: An adjective used by some people, particularly younger people, whose sexual orientation is not exclusively heterosexual (e.g., queer person, queer woman).

When Q is seen at the end of LGBT, it typically means Queer and, less often, questioning. Once considered a pejorative term, Queer has been reclaimed by some LGBT people to describe themselves; however, it is not a universally accepted term even within the LGBT community.

Particularly, older community members who were subjected to harassment and bullying under this label have found this reclamation to be offensive, while younger LGBTQ+ individuals relate to the term because it is innately non-gendered and arguably the most inclusive for genderfluid and non-binary individuals. Typically, for those who identify as Queer, the terms lesbian, gay, and bisexual are perceived to be too limiting or fraught with cultural connotations they feel are not applicable to them. Some people may use Queer, or more commonly genderqueer, to describe their gender identity and/or gender expression (see non-binary and genderqueer below).

The plus (+) can represent multiple variations and/or extensions to the term LGBTQ. One example is LGBTQIP2SAA. This acronym is used to abbreviate lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, Queer, questioning, intersex, pansexual, two-spirit (2S), androgynous, and asexual. The plus is used to be more inclusive of additional labels and identities. However, for the

purpose of this study, I used LGBTQ+ to represent diverse identities within the Queer community. Queer and gay are also used throughout as umbrella terms for the community when appropriate.

In addition to LGBTQ+, there are several common terms that require specific definition, including the following:

- Sex: Different biological and physiological characteristics of males and females, such as reproductive organs, chromosomes, and hormones. Sex is most often assigned at birth and based on external genitalia observed by the obstetrician.
- Gender: Socially constructed characteristics of women and men. Gender is different from sex assignment at birth, which is the assignment of “male,” “female,” or “intersex” based upon the genital configuration that an individual possesses at birth, along with chromosomes and hormone levels. Gender can include norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups.
  - Gender identity: a person’s internal sense of masculinity and femininity, and the word they use to best describe a personal conception of themselves
  - Gender roles: expectations imposed on someone based on their gender
  - Gender expression: someone’s external presentation of their gender
  - Gender attribution: how others perceive someone’s gender
  - Gender normativity: adhering to or reinforcing culturally expected standards of masculinity or femininity. Normativity is the process by which norms or standards are practiced and infused into institutions (Mayo, 2013).

- Cisgender: An individual whose gender identity is aligned with their assigned sex at birth (based on external genitalia). For example, a person born with a penis and assigned male at birth who identifies as a man is cisgender.
- Gender transgression: activities meant to critique “normal” gender roles and expectations. Some examples include political activities, drag performances, and non-normative gender identities.

Gender performance or performativity, according to Butler (1990) who coined the term, is the way in which one acts, walks, speaks, and dresses that creates an impression of being a man or being a woman. This performance can also be called gender expression, but ultimately, gender is an act that must be constructed. Gender has nothing to do with sex assigned at birth, and instead of a true representation of one’s identity, it is more often a performance designed to please others and to meet social expectations. When discussing gender as a social construct, it is important to note that gender is not attached to the human body. Rather, it is attached to the culture that surrounds human bodies. Gender is a manner in which humans make sense and attempt to order the world. It can be given to us, projected onto us, or it can be asked of us. For individuals who do not naturally feel gender, these constructions can be obtrusive. According to Jackson (2022), having to perform gender in ways that feel unnatural can be disruptive to our lives. This includes the societal pressures to conform to rules that may not be understood or cared for.

Gender constructions vary from society to society, can be changed, and evolve over time. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the concept of gender includes five important elements: relational, hierarchical, historical, contextual, and institutional (*Gender & health*, n.d.). Gender is hierarchical and produces inequalities that intersect with other social and

economic inequalities. Gender-based discrimination intersects with other aspects of discrimination, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, age, geographic location, gender identity and sexual orientation. This is referred to as intersectionality. While infants are most often assigned male or assigned female at birth (AMAB/AFAB), children are conditioned to exhibit “appropriate” norms and behaviors. This includes how they should interact with others of the same or different gender within households, work places, and communities. In this way, societal expectations link sex to gender expectations, even though these represent separate identity categories.

When individuals or groups do not conform or “fit” established gender norms, they often face stigma, discriminatory practices, or social exclusion, all of which adversely affect mental and physical health (*Gender & health*, n.d.). Labels associated with gender include the following:

- Genderqueer: This term refers to an individual who does not follow binary gender norms. They may exist outside of the binary or as a combination of both.
- Genderfluid: This term reflects a gender identity that is not fixed and changes over time. Trans advocate, Hernandez (1996), defined gender-fluid as an identity and/or expression that encompasses both masculine and feminine.
- Genderflux: This term refers to a gender identity that varies in intensity over time. This can fall under the genderfluid umbrella as well as trans and non-binary. The word “genderflux” was first published in 1994 in a Queer Pagans newsletter, where it was used to mean “shifting between genders.” Since 2014, the word has been used to mean “experiences of variation in the intensity within a gender identity.” Specifically,

genderflux differs from genderfluid in the intensity of gender felt and not an identity that necessarily moves between masculine and feminine or outside the binary. Some people conceptualize genderflux as fluid between agender and one or more gender identities.

- Non-binary: Not restricted to categories of “female” and “male” or “man” and “woman”; individuals whose gender identity exists outside of the male/female dichotomy.

Nonbinary is an umbrella term for all genders that are not exclusively “male” or “female” or fall outside the traditional binary “man” and “woman” categories. Nonbinary people may identify as a mix of two or more genders, as moving among genders, as not having a gender, as somewhere between male and female, or a gender completely separate from binary categorizations.

Several terms are used to describe the experience of being Queer and the process of coming out or remaining in the closet:

- Deadname: This term refers to a given name that its bearer no longer uses. It originated in online transgender spaces, and it can also be referred to as birth name, given name, legal name, or government name. Many trans people will select a name that better aligns with their gender identity.
- Identity: Multiple, conflicted, and contradictory notions of the self (Weedon, 1987).
- Norm: A social rule that creates exclusion for those who do not adhere.
- Out: A term that refers to an individual who has disclosed their sexual and/or gender identity with family members, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances.
- Heterosexism/sexism: The assumption that “heterosexuality is superior” (Mayo, 2013, p. 20). Negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that devalue, denigrate, stigmatize, or

restrict females or female-related characteristics and lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons or nonheterosexual forms of behavior (Herek, 1995; Worell & Remer, 2003).

- Heteronormativity: The presumed naturalness of heterosexuality and its ideals of monogamy, marriage, and reproduction. The pervasive assumption that sexual and gender differences simply do not exist.
- Homonormativity: For those who identify as LGBTQ+, this is the presumed naturalness of ideals.
- Homophobia: The irrational fear or hatred of people who identify or are perceived as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (Blackburn & Smith, 2010).
- Transphobia: The irrational fear or hatred of people who are transgender (people whose gender identity does not reflect the sex assigned at birth) and/or gender non-conforming.

While homophobia and transphobia are very real issues that can cause bullying, harassment, social isolation, and violence, intolerance, bias, and prejudice are typically more accurate descriptors of antipathy toward the LGBTQ+ community. No matter the term or terms used to describe sex, gender, and orientation diversity, all people deserve respect, safety, and affirmation, and until homophobia and transphobia are eradicated, the struggle continues.

### **The Intersection of Safer Spaces and LGBTQ+ Identities**

The struggle continues because youth who identify as LGBTQ+ are twice as likely to attempt suicide or self-harm than their straight identifying peers (*Saving LGBTQ Lives*, n.d.). Additionally, racial- and class-based segregation in schools shapes discrimination, and LGBTQ+ youth who are subjected to racism and/or classism may be more affected by homophobia/transphobia. As a result, these students have exacerbated experiences of bias.

Attending to the specificity of intersectional student identities attempts to improve school climate for LGBTQ+ students.

Even with a movement toward a more inclusive and equitable society, LGBTQ+ youth remain one of the most vulnerable and marginalized populations in and outside of school campuses. The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reported 59.1% of LGBTQ+ students felt unsafe at school because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. 98.8% reported hearing “gay” in a negative way, while 91% of respondents found these remarks distressing (GLSEN National School Climate Survey, 2019). In order for students to thrive, they must feel “socially, emotionally, and physically safe” (CDC.gov, n.d., p. 4). Within the classroom space, individual teachers are responsible for student progress and physical and emotional safety. How safe can the classroom be? How can educators develop and create safe spaces with a goal to move beyond safety to affirm and to support diverse student identities? Educators must ensure that a safe environment exists for all students regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

School campuses have been centers for civic and political activism since at least the 1800s (Ali, 2017). From movement-building and theory development, to providing student support services and creating safer spaces in the classroom, the term *safe space* has been used in various contexts throughout K-12 and higher education. Although the origin of the term is vague, the multiple uses have ultimately centered on increasing the safety and visibility of marginalized or oppressed community members (Ali, 2017). While I focus on the intersection between educational settings and safe spaces, the history behind the term reveals it has been used to describe numerous types of safety.

In the United States, the concept of a “safe space” originated in the gay liberation and women’s movements. Safety has long been a foundational element in feminist pedagogy, and feminism is largely responsible for introducing “safe space” to the cultural vernacular (Gay, 2015). As such, a safe space implies a certain license to speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance (Hanhardt, 2013). This is not only a physical space but also a space created by coming together in search of and as a community. The first safe spaces were gay bars and consciousness raising groups (Kenney, 2001). In educational contexts, the safe space classroom came about through second wave feminism and is one of the legacies of the Civil Rights Movement (Ali, 2017).

Whether the Civil Rights Movement or the Women’s movement, activism that contributed to larger societal movements occurred most notably in the latter half of the 20th century (Altbach & Peterson, 1971; Pasque & Vargas, 2014). As a result, many successful social movements were centered around campus-based organizations that focused on multiple issues. One example is the Students for a Democratic Society, which sponsored activism for the Vietnam War, economic justice, and Civil Rights during the 1950s (Van Dyke, 2003). The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s would not have come to fruition without the support of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU). Along with the NAACP, these educational institutions provided focal centers of protest, developed leaders, and contributed bodies to the movement as well as lawyers to lead court cases, such as those that led to the landmark 1954 ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* (Allen et al, 2007).

**Developing the Framework.** “Safe space” can have a multiplicity of meanings, but the idea of safety denotes a physical space that provides emotional protection and freedom from



physical or bodily threats. In educational institutions, a safe space, safer-space, and positive space originally were used to indicate that a teacher, educational institution, and/or student body did not tolerate anti-LGBTQ+ violence, harassment, or hate speech, and ideally created a safe place for all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and Queer students. The term has evolved to represent a space where individuals who feel marginalized can come together to communicate their experiences with marginalization. The idea of safe spaces has seen criticism on the grounds that a safe space stifles freedom of speech. However, these spaces are not meant to exclude anyone. Instead, they are designed to provide a location for students who may feel detached from the broader community. Ideally, this space provides an environment that fosters a sense of belonging where participants feel free from judgment and intimidation and free to discuss social injustices as well as their personal experiences.

Hunter (2008) privileged the idea of risk taking, while other authors (e.g., Boostrom, 1998; Holley & Steiner, 2005) emphasized the importance of self-disclosure and individuality. Barrett (2010) defined the term as “a metaphorical space in which students are sufficiently comfortable to take social and psychological risks by expressing their individuality” (p. 3). Wargo (2020) argued that safe spaces were “local hot spots for social justice and activist-oriented work” (p. 515) that emerged out of larger community needs for gender equity and justice. In educational settings, the role of the teacher is imperative in developing and maintaining the physical and metaphorical space of the classroom so all students can experience safety and affirmation.

On school campuses, a safe space can mean a particular haven for historically marginalized groups. One distinction in the literature comes from the emergence of feminist and

LGBTQ+ groups on and within campus communities (Iverson 2019; Ludlow, 2004). For these groups, the term has come to mean a location that serves as a refuge within the larger whole of the unsafe or hostile space. GLSEN (2020) defined a safe space as a supportive and affirming environment for LGBTQ+ students, and while no space can ever be completely safe, the goal is intentionally working toward creating and maintaining spaces that support and affirm minority identities. This type of environment is an attempt to give students with diverse sexualities and gender identities a chance to connect with other people who may feel isolated and may feel burdened with representing the LGBTQ+ community as a whole, especially if these students have classes where they perceive they are the only member of a minority community.

Having a safe space on campus to come together with people from the gay community who may have experienced similar microaggressions or homo-/transphobia could provide the type of supportive environment some students need to graduate, particularly if they feel silenced and invalidated elsewhere on campus. According to sociologist Cottom (2016), a classroom should be safely uncomfortable as long as this safe discomfort is to foster learning and critical thinking. There is a huge difference between feeling uncomfortable in a learning environment because of academic risk-taking as opposed to feeling uncomfortable across campus.

Additionally, it is neither unrealistic nor alarmist (Deruy, 2016) to suggest that some students are afraid of traditional college life and dorm living. Feeling physically and emotionally safe is an important part of academic success. Gay's (2015) *New York Times* essay about safe spaces made the important point that "those who mock the idea of safe space are most likely the same people who are able to take safety for granted. That's what makes discussions of safety and

safe spaces so difficult. We are also talking about privilege. As with everything else in life, there is no equality when it comes to safety” (p. 5).

Hunter (2008), outlined a safe space as having four requirements. The first requirement is the physical qualities of a place. Second, is metaphorical safety. The setting must provide a time and place where discrimination, intolerance, and inequity are not permitted. Any instances of bullying, name calling, and microaggressions must be addressed explicitly and swiftly. Third, the educational context provides a sense of familiarity and comfort, for example, a place where students can speak freely without fear of ridicule or judgment. Fourth, considering experimentation or innovation, a safe space is defined by its capacity to encourage risks (Hunter, 2008).

For this project, I hoped to move beyond a safe space to learn how teachers can develop affirming and brave spaces. The term brave space was first popularized by Arao and Clemens (2013) in *The Art of effective facilitation: Reflections from social justice educators*. In chapter eight, Arao and Clemens defined a brave space as a classroom environment that possesses five main elements:

1. “Controversy with civility,” where varying opinions are accepted;
2. “Owning intentions and impacts,” in which students acknowledge and discuss instances where a dialogue has affected the emotional well-being of another person;
3. “Challenge by choice,” where students have an option to step in and out of challenging conversations;
4. “Respect,” where students show respect for one another’s basic personhood; and
5. “No attacks,” where students agree not to intentionally inflict harm on one another.

For this study, I used a combination of the safe space frameworks presented by Hunter (2008) and Arao and Clemens (2013) because of the difference in their definitions. Hunter's work viewed the classroom at a macro level and includes requirements for a physical space for movement and performance to ensure maximum comfort for student bodies. Arao and Clemens focused on the rules to engage in productive dialogue within a physical space. Table 1.1 provides an overview of the elements of each study outlined by Hunter, Barrett, and Arao and Clemens.

This framework is appropriate for this study because teachers, especially Literacy and English Language Arts educators, consistently plan instruction to promote dialogue and classroom discussion. While current policies restrict what teachers and students can discuss, and states continue to legislate hate to maintain the status quo, secondary teachers are uniquely positioned to promote dialogue that elicits and targets biases. More importantly, these dialogic interactions can be tied to state and national standards concerning rhetorical analysis, such as author/speaker's purpose and point of view, with the intent to draw attention to why and how biases are harmful to individuals and ultimately, the broader campus community. Classroom-based brave spaces are often designed to promote challenging dialogue while affirming diverse student identities.

In order for every student to succeed, teachers and administrators must foster a sense of belonging and connectedness. Because many LGBTQ+ students are left feeling unsupported in their schools, it is imperative to implement specific policies and procedures that support LGBTQ+ youth, affirm their identities, promote safe and healthy learning environments, and advance equity and respect for all schools. A positive classroom culture and school climate have been associated with decreased depression, suicidal feelings, substance use, and unexcused

**Table 1.1**

*Defining Safe Spaces*

	Hunter (2008)	Barrett (2010)	Arao & Clemens (2013)
Elements:	<p>Physical qualities of a space</p> <p>The metaphorical safety of a physical space because it provides a specific time and place</p> <p>The context provides a feeling of comfort and familiarity</p> <p>The physical and emotional environment encourage risk-taking from all participants</p>	<p>A metaphorical space in which students are comfortable</p> <p>Students take social risks Students take psychological risks</p> <p>Students willingly express their individuality</p>	<p>Students engage in controversy with civility</p> <p>All participants take ownership by acknowledging and discussing the emotional impact of dialogue</p> <p>All participants choose whether to enter or to exit the dialogue at any time</p> <p>Respect for one another's "basic personhood" is agreed upon prior to dialogue</p> <p>All students intentionally agree not to inflict harm on one another</p>

school absences among LGBTQ+ students (CDC.gov, n.d.). According to the Trevor Project, transgender and nonbinary youth who have their pronouns respected by most people in their lives are 50% less likely to attempt suicide (*Saving LGBTQ Lives*, n.d.). LGBTQ+ youth who reported having only one accepting adult were 40% less likely to report a suicide attempt in the past year.

Academically, safe spaces can also provide opportunities for equitable access. The creation of physical spaces of access is important because of cultural shifts in marginalization for varying demographics. Cultural anthropology studies the value of space-making in terms of both studying a specific culture and understanding the disjointedness of societal growth. If a safe space is truly going to be maintained for all students at all times, teachers must be willing not only to support diverse student identities, but they must be willing to affirm students' identities regardless of their personal or religious views.

### **Positionality Statement**

To complete the description of this study's context, I present here my positionality statement and how I approached this work as a researcher and a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Subjectivity influences research because it is created from lived experiences. All humans possess biases and make assumptions, whether conscious or unconscious. In the following section, I outline my experiences and assumptions that informed this research.

According to Schwandt (2015), subjectivity is "the personal view of an individual, an unwarranted or unsupported claim, and a biased or prejudiced account" (pp. 289-290). Unlike positivist research that attempts to control objective variables, qualitative research acknowledges there is no true objectivity. A researcher's subjectivity is the awareness of how their biases and experiences influence their work. As such, a researcher must be able to acknowledge how

beliefs, experiences, and cultural standpoints exist relationally with their research focus and participants (Preissle, 2008). I bring multiple privileges, insights, and biases to this study that I will work to recognize as I conduct my analysis and writing of this study.

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research understands that all research has layers of bias. Because there is no absolute objectivity, subjectivity is also important because it helps determine whether or not a researcher is the appropriate person to conduct a study and how relationships will inform their work. A researcher must consider their subjectivity in each step of the process. I cannot remove or change my memories and experiences. My personal and professional experiences inform my research and my understanding of identity and education.

As a Queer, first generation doctoral student, my positionality is grounded in the personal and professional. I am a cisgender white female who was raised in a low income family in the inner city. As a member of the working poor, I currently experience privilege due to my whiteness. Growing up, however, my family was poor; my home life was unstable and unhealthy. I wore hand-me-down clothes and shopped at yard sales. My mom was embarrassed for her children to be on free and reduced lunch and exhibited immense shame regarding our economic status. Living in a poor part of town and being raised by mentally ill parents, I was surrounded by conflict.

One of the most important aspects of my childhood was church. I was 14 when my parents divorced, and up until then, we attended church regularly. My grandfather was a Southern Baptist preacher for 38 years before he passed away. The majority of my formative years were spent in the pews of his church or another. I have vivid memories of him preaching hellfire and brimstone. The need to repent was ever present. One sermon, that occurred multiple

times over the years, was about the evils of homosexuality. While an appeal to fear was frequently used, I distinctly remember feeling terrified of hell. I was 11-years-old when I first began to have suspicions about my sexual orientation.

As a licensed secondary English teacher, an intern supervisor, and a graduate teaching assistant, my beliefs are structured around power dynamics and the manner in which people interact with one another. Learning about Critical Race Theory and Feminism(s) as an undergraduate student helped to further develop a personal identity that aligned closely with Critical theory. These collegial learning experiences increased my desire to fight for social justice, and I decided to become an educator to act as an agent of change. I wanted to transform lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) from within the secondary English classroom.

In 2011, I began to pursue my Master's degree, and during the 2011-2012 academic school year, I completed a yearlong internship at a small suburban high school in a city school system in East Tennessee. 2011 was also the year I came out as gay to friends and family. It was then my interests and primary teaching objectives began to grow. I became interested in social justice, student motivation, teacher personality, Queer theory, and school and classroom culture. Due to issues that occurred within the classroom, I was also interested in how an English teacher could combat discriminatory language in the secondary classroom. As an intern, my primary focus was to combat the homophobic slurs and the homonegative behaviors I witnessed.

This experience, and the training in my graduate coursework, reaffirmed my belief in the power teachers possess. Teachers can use their position of power to influence students to learn, to think critically, and to reflect. I believe the classroom is a productive place to facilitate respectful discussion and to enact social change. As a public school teacher, it was my job to



help students claim the power to improve their lives. However, because individuals possess numerous identities and experience multiple realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), not every student enjoys the same amount of influence and privilege. Human nature operates in a world based on a struggle for power (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The secondary classroom is no different. It is merely a microcosm of humanity.

This subjectivity heavily influences the work I do. Unlike a positivist approach (Lincoln et al, 2018), my educational interests grew out of personal experience. I knew there was not merely one method of knowing (Lincoln et al, 2018). Because of an unstable homelife but positive and supportive school experiences, I discovered that knowledge was power and school was the tool to transform my life (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This ontology influences my research because I assume that school has the same effect on others. My assumption was (and sometimes still is) that education is the best way to improve one's circumstances.

My perspective is unique. According to Maykut and Morehouse (1994), this perspective is perhaps even paradoxical, as one has to be acutely attuned to the “experiences and meaning systems of others—to indwell—and at the same time to be aware of how one's own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand” (p. 123). The insider and outsider phenomenon is relevant to all approaches of qualitative methodology as the researcher plays such an integral role in data collection and analysis. If the researcher is an insider, or member of the group, they share characteristics, roles, or experiences with the participants who are being explored. An outsider to the community does not share commonalities with the research participants.

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I am an insider for this study; however, because of the diversity of our community, I am not a member of all groups within the LGBTQ+ spectrum. This means I am not privy to all experiences or identities that I do not claim as my own. Being an outsider does not mean one should not conduct research, but some participants may express concern about outsider status and a researcher's capacity to appreciate their experience (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). If participants were not already familiar with my identity, then I shared it with them during our interview. Ultimately, my position, including my membership status in relation to participants, is an essential and ever-present aspect of this inquiry as my position in the community lent credence to the participant recruitment process. This credibility also helped participants feel more secure in sharing their stories with someone who had the potential to relate.

In the context of my own study, I am both an insider and an outsider. This position reflects the complexity of the insider and outsider phenomenon. For this project, I am an insider because I am gay woman. I belong to the LGBTQ+ community, and I proudly claim this membership. The terms used to describe my identity have fluctuated over the years, and while I use labels such as gay and Queer interchangeably, the differing language does not change my sexual orientation or gender identity. However, with Queer communities and other aspects of intersectional identities, I also embody the position of an outsider. Additionally, as a researcher and doctoral candidate, participants may be skeptical of my group affiliation and motives and, ultimately, categorize me as an outsider. All researchers who seek to understand and elicit stories will also be on the outside as a result of the complexity and richness of qualitative methodology.

## **Chapter One Summary**

In Chapter One, I provided the problem this research project addresses, as well as the context and purpose. After I presented my research questions, I provided in depth definitions of the terminology I used for this project, including descriptive terms for participants and for safer spaces in schools. These key terms include the acronym LGBTQ+, the term safe space, and numerous other terms used to describe sexual orientation and diverse gender identities. In order to offer clarity, I also defined some of the terms that exist in opposition or operate as part of the cis-heteronormative binary. Because of the nature of this project, I also introduced the research approach of narrative inquiry as I seek the stories of those who identify as LGBTQ+. I closed this chapter with my own researcher positionality statement.

Based on my experiences and my positionality, I will need to handle my assumptions carefully as I anticipate that most interview participants have had a negative experience with education based on their identity and/or have been the victim of homo-/transphobic bullying.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

In Chapter Two, I begin by presenting the history and framework of Queer theory. I provide major theorists and possible tenets for Queer theory. I describe these as *possible* tenets because as a Critical theory, one of the requirements is interrogation. The importance of challenging the status quo and breaking down binary systems of thinking defy the notion of tenets, but the ones presented below are common across the literature reviewed. I synthesize research on Queer theory and end with a call for more research that centers student voices.

### Queer Theory

Given the spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities, what is Queer to one may be considered “unqueer” (Mizzi & Stebbins, 2010) by others. Originally used as a pejorative term, “queer” as a demographic label is being reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community to fight against oppressive and hurtful language, as well as to combat heteronormative and heterosexist behaviors in society. Whether used as an attempt to reclaim a word weaponized as a slur or used as a signifier of affinity and solidarity over identity (Marcus, 2005), Queer has come to include a spectrum of practices, diverse sexuality and gender identities (DSG). It can represent multiple labels, no label, or an unwillingness to assign language to one’s identity.

For this project, the term Queer will be used as a compact alternative to LGBTQ+ to represent various sexual and gender minorities. My use of the term does not imply “sameness,” but instead I use Queer to disrupt the pervasive structure of heteronormativity while also attempting to connect and unify members of the community. While the community shares the struggle for liberation, there are also significant notions of difference that underlie that struggle. Additionally, I use Queer to reflect the need to question or “to queer” white heteronormativity

and heterosexism. In the context of continually changing cultural environments, education researchers (whether Queer researchers or researchers doing Queer work) should not be afraid to explore these complexities of language as we work for liberation.

Queer theory is a Critical theory that evolved from the fields of gay and lesbian studies and women's studies. The term "Queer theory" was first used informally in the 1980s by American scholar of Chicana cultural and Queer theory, Gloria E. Anzaldúa (Goldberg, 2016). Anzaldúa and other scholars built upon the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault. Foucault rejected identity politics and viewed sexuality as a social construct (Goldberg, 2016). In the 1990s, Queer theory began to gain traction and legitimacy in academia as a response to sex debates among feminists, critiques of feminism, the rise of postmodern theory, and the AIDS crisis. The AIDS epidemic and feminist debates led to more radical politics and theorizing (Seidman, 1994; Walters, 1996). The first conference on Queer theory was organized by author and Professor Teresa de Lauretis and other members of the University of California, Santa Cruz Faculty Lesbian and Gay Studies Group in 1990 (*Queering the Academy*, n.d.). Some early Queer theorists include Judith Butler (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985), Adrienne Rich (1980), and Michael Warner (1999, 2003).

While the definition of Queer theory varies depending upon usage, it is generally associated with the theorization and study of identities and practices of gender and sexuality that exist outside of, in opposition to, and completely separate from heterosexuality and heteronormativity. Queer theory goes beyond exploring aspects of gay and lesbian identity and experience to interrogate the status quo and assumptions about relationships, gender, power, language, and sexual orientation. By definition, Queer rejects the socialized norm.

Two of the most significant works to establish a discussion on sexuality were Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* (1985). Butler and Sedgwick developed their arguments through readings of the classic essay "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex" by Gayle Rubin (1975). Rubin made two claims that have been instrumental in theorizing sexuality and gender. First, patriarchal culture depends upon men's exchange of women and, second, the incest taboo generates exogamy, or marrying outside of a community, clan, or tribe, and assumes an unspoken taboo on homosexuality.

Judith Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble* provides a framework for understanding the idea of gender as a social category. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argued that gender is a performance that must constantly be reproduced. Because gender must be repeatedly reproduced, its structure is always susceptible to evolution and subversion. Butler's post-structural approach to understanding gender explores the concept of gender performativity and how the "heterosexual matrix" (pp. 37-38) operates. Definitions of gender that emerge from the heterosexual matrix define femininity as a desire for men and masculinity as a desire for women.

Butler explored how definitions of gender assume definitions of sexuality and challenged the power of sex and gender norms. She did this through showing that norms are vulnerable to subversion and hinge upon exclusion because normative heterosexuality is organized in contrast to homosexuality. In the process of demonstrating how feminist models of gender continued to depend on heterosexual definitions of identity and desire, Butler rewrote psychoanalytic theory to reflect the difficulty of maintaining strict separation between homo- and heterosexuality (Marcus, 2005). This framework is helpful for understanding how homophobia and sexism

function within society and schools. *Gender Trouble* reflects how gender has been theorized as a “performance” of identity, and more importantly how narrow these gender codes are as the heterosexual matrix determines notions of gender. These limited notions restrict opportunities and severely limit individuals to express their true selves freely.

Similar to Butler, Sedgwick (1985) showed that homosexual desire was not the exclusive property of a minority because homosexual and heterosexual desire mutually define each other. She redefined heterosexuality as a fear of male homosexuality that motivates men to “route their desire for one another through women” (Marcus, 2005, p. 198). Sedgwick’s argument that men define women as their binary opposites because “so little distinguishes male homosociality from male homosexuality” (Sedgwick, 1985, pp. 118-119) formulated gender differences as a function of the homosocial/homosexual divide resulting in -isms as the products of oppositional binaries. Like Butler, Sedgwick showed that same-sex desire was not exclusive to minorities because homosexual and heterosexual desire mutually defined each other.

Both arguments created the basis for the Queer theory tenet that sexuality and gender are fluid, variable, and shifting, and these categories allow and even advocate for movement among and outside of such identity categories (Britzman, 1997). *Between Men* (Sedgwick, 1985) and *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990) took the conversation of gender and sexuality from an exclusively feminist approach and reoriented it as an encounter between feminism and gay studies. Sedgwick did this by synthesizing feminist theory with scholarship on gay males. Butler confronted feminism with sexuality represented primarily by lesbianism; specifically, a lesbianism that included butch-femme positioning dismissed by earlier theorists.

*Biological exuberance: Animal homosexuality and natural diversity* by Bagemihl (1999), should also be included in a discussion of the history of Queer theory. While Bagemihl's work focused on sexual diversity among animals, his observations on the birds and the bees significantly contributed to Queer theory in multiple ways. First, Bagemihl developed a more refined vocabulary that reflected the sexual diversity he observed in animals. Second, he provided a more complex framework to analyze and to understand human sexual behavior. This connection was made explicit through examples of scientists who were so steeped in the ideological premise that heterosexuality is the only natural orientation, they have relentlessly denied their own observations of animal behavior, some of whom neglected their protocols for collecting scientific evidence.

Bagemihl (1999) documented that all animals are presumed "heterosexual until proven guilty" (p. 93), but if animals observed in nature are considered the measurement of what is natural, then every type of sex is natural, homosexuality is not a biological error, and "the only sexual attitude unique to humans is homophobia" (Bagemihl p. 54). His book is best known for inciting a useful skepticism about how nature, and therefore knowledge, has been defined. The focus on observed animal behavior in *Biological Exuberance* freed Bagemihl to develop terminology that distinguished components of sexuality that the majority of human labels did not or could not articulate. Similarly to Bagemihl's observations, most humans are not completely straight or gay. This reflects Queer theory's frequent focus on fluidity. These foundations of Queer Theory are presented in Table 2.1.



**Table 2.1**

*Foundations of Queer theory*

Rubin (1975)	Sedgwick (1985)	Butler (1990)	Bagemihl (1999)
<p>Patriarchal culture depends upon men's exchange of women.</p> <p>The incest taboo generates exogamy, or marrying outside of a community, clan, or tribe, and assumes an unspoken taboo on homosexuality.</p>	<p>Same sex desire is not exclusive to sexual minorities.</p> <p>Heterosexual and same sex desire mutually define each other.</p> <p>Men define women as their binary opposites because little separates homosocial and homosexual.</p>	<p>Gender is a performance.</p> <p>Gender performance must constantly be reproduced.</p> <p>The structure of gender is always susceptible to evolution and subversion.</p> <p>Femininity is defined as a desire for men and masculinity as a desire for women.</p> <p>Definitions of gender assume definitions of sexuality.</p>	<p>More refined vocabulary that reflected sexual diversity observed in animals.</p> <p>More complex framework to analyze and to understand human sexual behavior.</p> <p>"The only sexual attitude unique to humans is homophobia."</p>

## **Possible Tenets**

In synthesizing the research that has come to form what we now call Queer Theory, I find five primary ideas, which some might call tenets. However, the position of Queer as troubling and rejecting norms means that thinking in terms of tenets, in itself, is not Queer. A Queer approach strives to suspend sexual and gender identities rather than underscore them (Jagose, 1996); however, this is not to abandon the concept of gender because non-heterosexuality depends on assigning a gender to oneself and to the people to whom one is sexually attracted (Marcus, 2005). In this light, I present here ideas and themes common across the Queer literature:

1. Fluidity, in that sexuality and gender exist on a spectrum.
2. Gender is a social construct.
3. Gender roles are harmful.
4. Interrogation of norms, which must be questioned constantly.
5. Intersectionality is the systematic study of the ways in which differences such as race, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, and other sociopolitical and cultural categories interrelate (Crenshaw 1989, 1991).

**Fluidity.** Sexual orientation and gender exist on a spectrum. As such, Queer theory emphasizes the fluid and humanly performed nature of sexualities and gender identity. Because of this continuum, one primary tenet of Queer theory is fluidity. This spectrum is reflected in the famous Kinsey scale (Kinsey et al, 1948). The Kinsey team interviewed thousands of people about their sexual histories. This data revealed that sexual behaviors, thoughts, and feelings towards the same or opposite sex were not always consistent across time. Instead of assigning

people to three categories—heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual—the team used a seven-point scale. It ranges from 0 to 6 with an additional category of “X.”

In an attempt to offer a more nuanced approach, the Kinsey scale offered a continuum to examine human sexuality, but it failed to reflect individual lived experiences. Because sexuality and gender are fluid, variable, and shifting, these categories allow and even advocate for movement among and outside of such identity categories. However, it is important to recognize that sexual orientation does not change and many experience their sexuality as stable. This is important to note because fluidity does not mean orientation is a choice; there is no “cure” or method to convert LGBTQ+ individuals. In fact, what some people might perceive as a “change” in sexual orientation and/or gender identity is usually more reflective of an unlearning of cisheteronormative values and expectations.

**Gender is a social construct.** One important distinction is that gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Gender identity is a person’s internal sense of gender. Gender expression refers to the external manifestations of gender and can change. Gender is expressed through multiple aspects. These can include, but are not limited to, a person’s name, pronouns, clothing, haircut, behavior, voice, body characteristics; neither gender nor gender expression is indicative of sexual orientation. Society labels these performances as masculine and feminine. However, what is considered masculine or feminine not only evolves over time but also varies by culture and context. Typically, transgender people seek to align their gender expression with their gender identity, rather than the sex assigned at birth. Sex, gender, and orientation are three separate identities that overlap because cis-heteronormative patriarchy is the engine behind all of them. Gender roles serve to maintain power and are social constructions that have been

normalized and reinforced at the individual, institutional, and cultural levels. This process occurs through language and social conditioning.

**Gender roles are harmful.** Another aspect of Queer theory is that traditional heterosexual gender roles are harmful (Rodriguez & Pinar, 2007). Gender is a construct that must be constantly performed, so power structures and language are used to normalize societal expectations and gender roles. Gender roles function only to exacerbate inequality. These roles serve to maintain and reinforce harmful power dynamics in society and in schools. Gender roles are communicated and expressed through language, narrative, and counternarrative. The hidden curriculum of masculinity and femininity and “appropriate” behaviors is everywhere, from clothes to toys to the literary canon. Colors and toys exemplify how hegemony works, and this is only one of many ways by which groups in power are able to maintain structures that benefit them. One of the most widespread institutions where definitions of gender and sexuality are transmitted is school.

Language is power, and the ability to label and to construct ways of knowing through discourse is one way to exert control and maintain dominance (Derrida, 1986; Foucault, 1975, 1980; Lacan, 1957). Dominant ideology uses societal structures and discursive practices to influence how individuals live their lives. Hurtado (1999) suggested that we have “yet to chronicle how those who oppress make sense of their power in relationship to those they have injured” (p. 226). Educational structures wield an immense amount of power and influence over student lives. Individuals who deviate from dominant social practices experience prejudice and discrimination. In order to use the classroom as a site for social change, teachers must be willing to challenge the norm and break binary ways of knowing.

**Interrogation.** Queer theory stands against homogenizing and contests normativity. This tenet requires analysis and critiques of societal and political norms. While the primary focus is norms as they relate to the experiences of sexuality and gender, Queer theory is useful to investigate and problematize any societal norms. Just as gender is a socially constructed public and political affair, Queer theorists argue sexuality and gender expression are not private affairs. This type of inquiry also requires constant autobiographical re-narrativization (Brim & Gahziani, 2016; Wargo, 2019).

Queer theory critically interrogates ideas of selfhood, agency, and experience; however, it is often unable to accommodate the issues faced by gays and lesbians of color who come from racialized communities (Johnson, 2001). Much of the work that has been conducted has been by and for white people which reflects the need for an intersectional approach to a Queer framework.

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) explicitly addressed this critique when she warned that “[Q]ueer is used as a false unifying umbrella which all ‘queers’ of all races, ethnicities and classes are shored under” (p. 250). While acknowledging that we need this umbrella “to solidify our ranks against outsiders,” Anzaldúa nevertheless urged that even when we “seek shelter under [Queer], we must not forget that it homogenizes, erases our differences” (p. 250). Because of this, Queer theory must take an intersectional approach and actively challenge ideas of whiteness.

**Intersectionality.** The term intersectionality was originally coined by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). Crenshaw foregrounded the experiences of women of color and developed a Black feminist critique of anti-racist policy discourse and feminist theory. Further, Crenshaw (1991) offered a key multi-dimensional model of intersectionality, as structural, political and

representational. Intersectionality is an analytical framework to understand how multiple aspects of identity can contribute to systematic oppression. Intersectionality is not meant to be a theory of everything or a silver bullet. It is intended only to examine multiple points of oppression and how overlapping social identities provide advantages and disadvantages.

Intersectionality allows for an analysis of how multiple factors influence an individual instead of an attempt to understand identity factors in isolation. Single-axis frameworks can erase the specificity of experiences of Black, indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) LGBTQ+ people. McCall (2005) suggested that intersectionality can be approached through ‘inter-categorical complexity’ in order to “document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions” (p. 2). As a result, social research with an intersectional framework can create new, overlapping and complex categories of analysis. An Intersectional Queer Theory acknowledges that heteronormativity “interacts with institutional racism, patriarchy, and class exploitation to define us in numerous ways as marginal and oppressed subjects” (Cohen, 2012, p. 448).

### **Theoretical Framework for this Study**

For this project, the focus was how identity influences experiences in educational contexts. An Intersectional Queer approach can inform scholarship and teacher education because, by definition, Intersectional Queer Theory (IQT) investigates and challenges all norms and contests the status quo. Frequently, intersectionality is used in law and policy development to focus on racial inequality, but this study uses this theory to develop a fuller picture of the challenges LGBTQ+ students face concerning oppression and marginalization. Further, intersectionality is often cited to address issues of gender and ethnic inequalities and policy

making (Bose, 2012). Reflecting on the experience of LGBTQ+ students, intersectionality theory emphasized the importance of a holistic identity, especially when facilitating learning (Collins & Bilge, 2016). For example, by exploring the intersections of participants' gender, sexual orientation, racial and ethnic background, immigration status, and education experiences, teachers could plan lessons to better support their gay and trans students. Intersectionality is a multidimensional framework to better understand Queer students' educational experiences (Misawa 2010, 2015).

In considering the role of Queer theory for this project, it is important to highlight that IQT is a Critical theory. Critical researchers work to empower marginalized groups by promoting the interrogation of traditionally accepted norms (Brookfield, 2001; Elias & Merriam, 2005; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007). In research concerned with the LGBTQ+ community, theory can be utilized to explore the experience of access and opportunity to counter marginalization and oppression within the classroom or any educational setting and ultimately facilitating a better understanding of systemic barriers that can exist.

Queer research generally falls into three categories for educational circles. The first category under Queer research is identity work. In educational research, this work seeks to explore the identities and lives of sexual minorities and trans or gender non-confirming individuals (Mizzi & Stebbins, 2010). This work centers Queer lives, experiences, and Queer identities. Second, Queer research offers a distinction between the dominant, white middle-class, privileged experience and experiences that are less visible. Third, Queer research examines discourses that regard Queer lives and experiences as invisible or deviant (Dilley, 1999; Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). Queer theory is additionally appropriate because this project explored the

intersection of how identities influence the educational experiences of LGBTQ+ students and, therefore, falls under the first category for Queer research.

Queer theory rejects binary distinctions as arbitrary and created by those with social power. For this narrative inquiry, Intersectional Queer Theory is an appropriate framework because it seeks to disrupt normalized categories and break binaries of oppression including, but not limited to, woman/man, gay/straight, feminine/masculine, student/teacher, and it offers educators a lens in which they can transform their praxis. According to Mizzi & Stebbins (2010), in many ways, Queer theory offers the most qualitative of methodologies for collecting and analyzing data as it questions, and even defies, notions of objectivity and the essentiality of fact. Qualitative inquiry facilitates Queer Theory because it enables the exploration of difference, fluidity of identities, hierarchies, and spaces (Valocchi, 2005); Queer identity is not something that can be quantified. Queer theory opens more texts for study and more bodies of knowledge to compile, compare, and evaluate. According to Browne (2007), a *[Q]ueer* questionnaire would need to be open-ended and qualitative in order to allow for movement across and among categories of sexualities. This approach also acknowledges the temporality and fluidity of brave and safer spaces.

In order to collect information about sexual and gender identities, researchers must take a methodological approach that elicits narratives. According to Halberstam (1998), if researchers expect to “squeeze truth from raw data” (p. 10), a quantitative approach is inappropriate to study sexuality and Queer subcultures because it would merely reproduce known categories, and quantitative methods provide no way to conduct participatory observations. A truly ‘queer’ questionnaire must be open-ended and qualitative (Browne, 2007).



Steedman (1987) argued that research that investigates inequality must work against generalization, universalization, and simplification. Therefore, single narratives, whether (auto)biographical or a case study, aided in the analysis of social locations as intersections because they can account for subjectivity in experiences. This approach does require an acknowledgment of the complexity of the relationship between the individual or group and the researcher (Behar, 1993; Fotopoulou, 2012), which is also a trait of qualitative inquiry. A Queer theory approach demonstrates how differences and identities are contextual and always *becoming* according to what is socially acceptable within a certain time and place.

At its core, Queer theory is about questioning the presumptions, values, and viewpoints from positions, marginal and central, especially those that normally go unquestioned. It is the process, rather than the product, partially because the product of Queer theory is often more inquiry rather than declaration.

While much theorizing has been done on Queer theory and the foundations of sexuality studies, there is a lack of research that focuses on the intersection of student experiences and a teacher's role in affirming diverse sexualities and genders. According to Alexander (2005), as teachers we place our bodies in the instructional gaps to negotiate the tensions that often "exist between our teaching persona and the fullness of our being" (p. 258). Alexander evokes his Black and Queer self as an example of how the personal can become a focal point in the classroom. Sexualized and racialized bodies always signal a history. This enfolded knowledge informs pedagogy and teachers' positionality to the content matter.

Teachers must be willing to deconstruct the heterosexual norm. This is a way to explore and to celebrate new ways of reading the world. So how might teachers affirm diverse student

identities? How might secondary educators create a classroom environment that moves beyond safety into support? If we do not advocate and acknowledge our privileges, we are a part of the problem. Queer theory is in part about opening and reclaiming spaces that are both public and private (Dilley, 1999). Research on marginalized groups makes unequal power relations visible and facilitates the development of political discourse (Fotopoulou, 2012).

### **Methodological Literature Reviewed**

To complete this literature review, I searched for studies similar to mine. Specifically, I searched for studies that centered student voices by asking Queer students to share their experiences in secondary schools. I conducted a keyword search in ERIC using the following terms:

- queer or lgbtq or gay or lgbt or lesbian or homosexual or transgender
- narrative inquiry
- secondary school or high school or secondary education

This yielded eight results (summarized in Table 2.2 below), seven reports of research, and six of which were relevant to this study and synthesized below. Four studies focused on the teacher or principal, and two studies focused on student experiences. I begin with the studies that examined the experiences of teachers or in one case, a principal, and I then move into the studies that focused on student experiences.

**Teacher Centered.** Each study that was included met the criteria for inclusion by either centering LGBTQ voices or using narrative inquiry as the methodology. In the four studies that met the inclusion criteria but centered teachers' or principals' stories, I identified three themes: teacher identity versus sexual identity, supportive environment, and educational equity.

Coker and Cain's (2018) narrative inquiry is an autoethnographical account of one Queer-identified middle school teacher's career trajectory in the South as he struggled to navigate his identity in relationship to his profession and students. This study provided a rationale for middle grades teachers to have the ability to disclose their identities to students. The importance of gay disclosure was linked to the importance of cultivating a receptive environment for LGBTQ+ adolescents.

Endo et al. (2010) examined the lived experiences of six lesbian and gay teachers working in primary and secondary school settings in the Midwest region of the USA. These individuals also kept their sexual identity separate from their identity as a teacher. In addition to exploring the relationship between the construction of teacher identity and sexual identity, this study sought to understand what it was like to be a queer teacher in the Midwest.

Ritchies and Wilson's (2000) book explored the power of narrative to understand the complexities and contradictions of what teacher identity development means. They argued that the development of a professional identity is inextricable from one's personal identity. They suggested that when teachers have the opportunity to construct their own narratives of learning within a supportive community, they can begin to compose new narratives of identity and practice.

Kupfer (2000) concealed her identity from students and her autoethnographic account retraced twenty years of teaching to reflect on the changes she made in her pedagogy. Originally, Kupfer believed that a certain distance between students and teachers should be maintained. Citing internalized homophobia, Kupfer argued that she had to develop a full acceptance of her

sexuality in order to understand the relationship between her orientation and her effectiveness as a teacher.

In each of these studies, the teachers did not disclose their sexual orientation to their students (Coker & Cain, 2018; Endo et al., 2010). Each study explored the power narratives possess in understanding the complexities and contradictions of what it means to develop as a teacher while identifying under the Queer umbrella. This research argued that professional identity is inextricable from personal identity. A sub-theme of these included self-acceptance. LGBTQ+ teachers are often less able to disclose their identities or offer their stories safely because of the possible consequences. These range from stigma to possible termination.

Many participants did not disclose their identity because they felt the classroom was not an appropriate place for such conversations. However, these choices were also made partly out of fear of the community's response, especially from parents. Despite the desire to conceal their sexual orientation, all of the Queer teachers revealed that promoting educational equity and social justice in the school setting was their responsibility. This was coupled with the goal to provide a safe space for all students. Personal conflict with one's identity can create a serious internal struggle.

The very existence of Queer teachers transgresses the prescriptive nature of compulsory heteronormativity, but these societal barriers do not provide support for Queer educators to feel safe enough to disregard this norm. Whether in the classroom or broader society, these fears prevent teachers from coming out and finding acceptance in their school and the classroom. This is a privilege that their heterosexual colleagues enjoy daily.

In order for change to occur, teacher educators and researchers need to understand the experiences of Queer teachers and work to prepare preservice teachers and administrators for a future beyond inclusion, that questions and challenges societal norms for gender and sexual identity constructions.

**Student Centered.** While Porreca (2010) focused on the principal's role in creating a supportive learning environment for LGBT students, I include this here as they examined supportive principals who advocated for and on behalf of queer students through policy and modeling expected behaviors of respect, inclusion, and equity for all students. Ultimately, supportive principals believe the principal's role is multifaceted, spanning an academic leader, a politician, a collaborator, a visible leader in the school and in the community, and a person who models the behavior they expect to see.

Bartone (2018) explored the educational experiences of James, a transgender male, and focused specifically on the intersection of gender identity and his journey through K-8 Catholic schools. This study revealed the tensions of school and home as his Catholic school reinforced traditional norms of gender, but his homelife included a family that resisted these norms. The collected narratives showed how James developed an understanding of gender and identity as he emerged from school.

Callaghan (2016) conducted a 5-year, multimethod qualitative study that argued against the idea that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students in Canadian Catholic schools are mentally ill or passive victims in need of special pastoral care. Instead, these students are activists who resisted homophobic oppression in school. This article concentrated on three youth activists, whose stories were analyzed through narrative inquiry and concluded that

antihomophobia education efforts should not overlook Catholic schools for potential student leaders.

In both these studies (Bartone, 2018; Callaghan 2016) these students pushed against norms, engaged in inquiry through self-reliance, and advocated for change. These themes demonstrate the complexity of navigating school while trying to understand one's gender identity, sexual orientation, and self. Educators can learn how to support queer and transgender youth to create educational lessons and develop safer spaces for all students.

Learning from all while building on the last three, this dissertation study looked at how students who fall under the Queer umbrella navigate educational environments. This includes the concern for student safety, the desire to advocate for social justice, the goal of creating an atmosphere of caring for all students within and across their schools, and either positive, negative, or neutral life experiences as a result of their LGBTQ identity.

## **Summary of Chapter Two**

In Chapter Two, I outlined the foundations of Queer theory, including major theorists and how they contributed to the development of this theory. Table 2.1 summarizes the foundations of Queer theory, including Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble*, Sedgwick's (1985) *Between Men*, and Bagemihl's (1999) *Biological Exuberance*. I then presented possible tenets to consider from the synthesis of these Queer theorists and relevant literature. These possible tenets include 1) Fluidity, 2) Interrogation, 3) Gender is a social construct, 4) Gender roles are harmful, and 5) Intersectionality. I summarized each of these tenets while remaining cognizant that as a Critical theory, interrogation of norms is required; so by definition, Queer theory resists structured tenets. After outlining these tenets, I elaborated on how Intersectional Queer Theory (IQT) is an

appropriate theoretical framework for this dissertation study. Chapter Two concluded with a review of the methodological literature aimed to facilitate a better understanding of the current research focused on narrative inquiry and the experiences of the Queer community. The next chapter addresses study methodology, including the following major research areas: research design, researcher trustworthiness, as well as data sources and data collection.

**Table 2.2***Review of Methodological Literature*

Author	Participant	Method	Major Findings
Coker and Cain (2018)	Teacher	Narrative inquiry of one queer-identified middle school teacher.	This study followed one queer-identified middle school teacher's struggle to navigate coming out to his students. The major finding of this narrative inquiry is the importance of educators disclosing their identities to students as a way to cultivate a receptive environment for LGBTQ+ adolescents.
Endo et al (2010)	Teacher	Narrative inquiry of six lesbian and gay teachers in the Midwest United States.	This study focused on six closeted teachers in the Midwest. The pressures of heteronormative society led these individuals to keep their sexual identity separate from their teacher identity for multiple reasons. Focusing on how they constructed and maintained their identities, the major findings of this study included: teachers felt as if they had to hide their sexual orientation for fear of rejection, ridicule, and being perceived as "just a gay person" (p. 1027).
Porreca (2010)	Principal	Narrative inquiry on seven principals	This study examined the role of the high school principal in creating a supportive school environment for LGBT students. The major finding of this study is that supportive principals can and do make a difference in school climate and the lives of LGBTQ+ students. These findings showed that supportive and affirming high school principals engage in a variety of specific tasks and behaviors. These included assisting individual students with home and school situations arising as a result of their sexual orientation and gender expression, creating or adapting policies to make their building a more welcoming environment for LGBTQ+ individuals, abolishing prohibitions on



**Table 2.2 Continued**

<p>Porreca (2010)</p>	<p>Principal</p>	<p>Narrative inquiry on seven principals</p>	<p>same-sex couples attending school, modeling expected behaviors of respect, inclusion, and equity for all students, being the public face of LGBTQ advocacy in their schools, districts, and communities. All the participants reported receiving thank yous from students, parents, and alumni as well as a feeling of pride and accomplishment in doing work that makes a real difference in the lives of their students.</p>
<p>Ritchie et al. (2000)</p>	<p>Teacher</p>	<p>Narrative inquiry of one lesbian teacher</p>	<p>This study explored the power of narrative in understanding the complexities and contradictions of what it means to develop as a teacher. The major findings include professional identity development is inextricable from personal identity, and when teachers have the opportunity to compose their own stories of learning within a supportive community, they can begin to compose new narratives of identity and practice.</p>
<p>Bartone (2018)</p>	<p>Student</p>	<p>Narrative inquiry of one trans-masculine student.</p>	<p>This article focused on the educational experiences in a K-8 Catholic school attended by James, a trans male. The purpose was to understand how he came to understand gender and identity. The major findings of this narrative reflected the tensions between school and home. Catholic school reinforced traditional norms of gender and his family subverted these norms. James never felt comfortable at school in his assigned gender, and he pushed against norms, engaged in inquiry through self-reliance, and longed for a different gender identity and biological self. These themes demonstrate the complexity of navigating school while trying to understand one's gender, identity and self.</p>

**Table 2.2 Continued**

Callaghan (2016)	Student	Narrative inquiry of three youth activists	This article argues that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and Queer students in Canadian Catholic schools are not inherently mentally ill, passive victims in need of special pastoral care. Rather, the findings suggest these LGBTQ students are activists who strongly resist homophobic oppression at school. This study ultimately concludes that antihomophobia education efforts should not overlook potential student leaders enrolled in Catholic schools.
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### Chapter Three: Methods

According to the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), 2021 broke the record for the most anti-LGBTQ+ bills passed by state legislatures in a single year. Almost 300 bills sought to criminalize transition-related care for minors, ban trans people from school sports, ban discussions of Queer and trans people in classrooms, and otherwise restrict the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. From mainstream news outlets to extremist right-wing media, anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, specifically anti-trans rhetoric, has been on the rise across the country. Much of 2022 was spent vilifying trans people, drag queens, teachers, school boards, and others as “groomers,” “pedophiles,” and worse.

With this context in mind, the primary goal of this study was to gain an understanding of how LGBTQ+ identities influence individual academic experiences. I used narrative inquiry as the research method to accomplish this goal because narrative inquiry allows researchers to emphasize the importance of narratives and life stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

This type of inquiry also integrates counternarratives from participants, as their identities and bodies exist outside of cisheteronormative binaries. Because narrative inquiry helps to understand participants’ stories, this type of research attaches importance to capturing counternarratives and lived experiences; thus, narrative inquiry is an appropriate framework to explore how diverse sexuality and gender expression affects individuals. The purpose of this study was to seek a better understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ+ learners as they navigate education in the Southeastern U.S.

To begin, this dissertation is anchored in two guiding research questions and a comprehensive literature review. The research questions are as follows:

1. What stories to LGBTQ+ students tell about their educational experiences?
2. What strategies do LGBTQ+ students use to survive in educational environments?

Chapter Three begins with an overview of qualitative research and my rationale for narrative inquiry before moving to a discussion of research participants, data collection, data analysis, issues of validity, concluding with ethical considerations involved in the study and issues of trustworthiness.

### **Research Design**

Research exploring the educational experiences of LGBTQ+ youth lends itself to a study of consciousness and social interactions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) and, therefore, the methodology of qualitative research (Preissle, 2008). In order to accomplish this goal, narrative inquiry was used as the research methodology, as educational experiences can be understood to a greater degree by gathering the stories of participants (Creswell, 2011) to reveal a better understanding of how students who identify as LGBTQ+ experience school. Before describing my specific study, I present a brief overview of qualitative research and a description of narrative inquiry as applicable to this study's research design.

Qualitative research can mean different things within the historical field as it possesses roots in history, philosophy, and anthropology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, 2011), but at its core, it is about gaining a more complete understanding of a topic through truthful reporting and firsthand knowledge (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018). At the most basic level, qualitative research seeks to understand, to explore in an in-depth manner, and not to generalize. It is about ways of knowing. While exploring qualitative research methodologies in relation to research

design and implementation, it is imperative to consider how specific methodologies, methods, and theoretical frameworks may align or contradict the research purpose.

**Characteristics of Qualitative Research.** With this brief overview in mind, I now turn to the primary traits of qualitative research to then move into how these are appropriate for my research. Scholars have identified several characteristics of qualitative research. Bogdan and Biklen (1995, 1998, 2003, 2007) defined qualitative research as (1) Naturalistic, (2) Descriptive, (3) Inductive, (4) Reflexive, and (5) Complex. Because of contextual complexity, I do not seek to find “the Truth,” but rather to understand the human experience.

**Naturalistic.** The first characteristic of qualitative research is that it is *naturalistic*. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify characteristics that make humans the “instrument of choice” for naturalistic inquiry. Humans are responsive to environmental cues and able to interact with their situation; they have the ability to collect information at multiple levels simultaneously, and they are able to perceive situations holistically.

This study represents naturalistic research because the interviews and observations were conducted in real world settings. This research did not take place in a laboratory or artificial setting. Knowledge is not created in a vacuum; therefore, a realistic setting was required to conduct fieldwork and to gather data. Research data are a product of various situational influences, and these interviews sought to understand the meanings participants constructed based on their interactions with the world and with other people. These interactions allow humans to construct knowledge based upon their surroundings and relationships they possess with people, places, and objects. These relationships and the unique nature of lived experience require an emphasis on *the importance of context*. Because context is key, the setting for

collecting this qualitative data was familiar and natural. Participants were asked to choose a setting they felt most comfortable in.

Collecting these data in a natural setting the participants chose provided supplemental understanding of their actions by being observed in a natural setting. Because these interviews asked about educational experiences, the settings were also understood in relation to the institutions they represent or are a part of. To maintain a naturalistic approach, I recognized individual differences and embraced the role that in depth knowledge plays and can be constructed from the data.

**Descriptive.** Another characteristic of qualitative research is that it is *descriptive*. I collected data with the goal to produce a thick description of each participant's context and narrative (Geertz, 1973). The written research results of this study are descriptive and contain quotations from the data to illustrate the findings as well as justify the implications. This type of research provides a greater depth of understanding. This study is descriptive as it aimed to accurately and systematically describe the educational experiences of members of the LGBTQ+ community. This meant that I operated under the assumption that nothing was trivial. All aspects of the environments were documented and considered as a clue to unlocking a deeper understanding. Description succeeds as a method of data collection when nothing is taken for granted and every detail is considered.

Qualitative data sources include interview transcripts, fieldnotes, photographs, videos, personal documents (e.g., diaries, memos, letters), and other official records. As I searched for understanding, there was no way to reduce the pages of narration and other data to numbers or symbols. Instead, I attempted to analyze the descriptive data with all of its richness. This

included attempting to remain as close as possible in order to maintain fidelity to the recording or transcription (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The written word is extremely important in collecting data and disseminating the findings.

Because qualitative inquiry focuses on meaning in context, it requires a data collection instrument that is “sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data” (Merriam, 1998, p. 1). The researcher is the primary instrument. As outlined in Chapter One, understanding and acknowledging subjectivity within myself and the participants is another key characteristic. In order to learn the meaning, I had to watch, listen, and participate. The reality of this research was constructed through the manner in which I showed my workings. As a result, I will describe each step of the research procedures.

**Inductive.** One aspect of these procedures is that qualitative research is *inductive*. Instead of stating a hypothesis and then testing the hypothesis, as is found in positivist research, qualitative scholars analyze data from interviews, observations, and artifacts to build concepts or theories (Clandinin, Caine, & Lessard, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I did not seek evidence to support or disprove a hypothesis. Instead, theory was built from the bottom up and grounded in data. I used multiple pieces of evidence that are interconnected to construct a picture through the process.

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), the process of data analysis is “like a funnel: Things are open at the beginning (or top) and more directed and specific at the bottom. The qualitative researcher plans to use part of the study to learn what the important questions are” (p. 6). As a researcher, I did not assume that enough was known to recognize important concerns before undertaking the research.

Unlike quantitative research, research participants were not randomized but were purposively selected to yield understanding of individual human behavior with complexity and contextuality. In addition to non-random, purposely selected participants, my sample size was kept small instead of large and representative. This type of research does not privilege one single methodological practice over another. Qualitative methods are inductive and responsive to what is learned as the study progresses. With a lens focusing on interactions and the surrounding environments, the theoretical framing develops from a constructivist point of view. This constructivist lens allows for researcher and participant to create knowledge via their interactions between themselves and what is known (Preissle & Grant, 2004).

This study is inductive because after analyzing the data, I made specific observations to identify patterns present in the interview data. Then, I made inferences based upon the themes to make a general conclusion. These implications are presented in Chapter five.

**Reflexive.** This project was reflexive and placed an emphasis on *the process*. Reflexivity required me to examine my judgments, biases, and belief systems throughout the research process. The act of (self) conscious, critical review of the self and the self's actions is presented in relationship to all else. Schwandt (2015) defined reflexivity as "the process of critical self reflection on one's biases, theoretical predispositions, preferences, and so forth" (p. 268). In order to do this, I had to actively and thoroughly examine my judgments. One important question I considered at each stage of the research project was, Do my personal beliefs predispose me to reason that my data points towards a particular conclusion? The goal was to identify if any personal ideologies incidentally affected the research.



**Complex.** Unlike statistical methods, which are deductive, the mode of analysis for qualitative methodology is complex, as meaning making is an important part of the process. Because of the importance of *participant perspectives*, it is important to focus on accurately capturing the experiences and perspectives of research participants. Member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), where the researcher shares the transcript or draft of an article, is part of the process to make meaning and helps researchers triangulate the data.

Methodology is a recursive process that must be addressed throughout the entire life of a research project. In order to work toward the objectives of the research questions and the goals of this dissertation study, I selected narrative inquiry.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

In this section, I provide a definition of Narrative Inquiry followed by a description of how I used it. As defined in Chapter two, I utilized Intersectional Queer Theory (IQT) (Misawa, 2012) to guide this Narrative Inquiry. These theories aided in a deep exploration of Queer educational experiences throughout this study. Theory served as a way to gain a deeper understanding of how LGBTQ+ learners experience their world.

Narrative research has many forms, uses a variety of analytic practices, and is rooted in different social and humanities disciplines (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004). As a result, it represents a group of approaches. These approaches typically focus on the lives of individuals as told through their own stories. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) defined it as “a way of understanding and inquiring into experience through collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (p. 20).

Narrative inquiry allows researchers to emphasize the importance of narratives and life stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). We construct our lives through story: we tell and we retell stories. Narrative is in everything, it is everywhere, and according to Riessman (2008), it is “simply there, itself” (p. 3). Narrative consists of stories lived and told with focus on structure and temporality. It is a way of understanding experience, but it is an interpretive process because stories are detailed accounts of narrative events (Kim, 2016).

Narrative might be the phenomenon being studied, or it might be the method used in a study, like the procedures of analyzing stories told (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000). Stories do not come out of nowhere, nor do they simply represent experience or an event as it actually happened. Rather, stories are “always a representation of that, and as such, are a very rich means for accessing inner truths, those ideas, beliefs and commitments which an individual holds dear” (Andrews, 2012, p. 34). Narratives are event-centered, experience-centered, and co-constructed. Not only are they focused on recounting experiences through past events, but they are also focused on recounting an experience through feelings, beliefs, and changes in behavior. Each time a narrative is told, it is uniquely told. The participants guided the sharing through the support I provided.

Narrative stories are often “heard and shaped by the researchers into a *chronology*, even if they are not told that way by the participant(s)” (Creswell, 2013, p. 71). A temporal change is conveyed when individuals discuss their lives and experiences, and they may talk about their past, present, or future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), as the past, present, and future are always in conversation with one another (Johnson, 2021). Because of this, narrative inquiry best suited my research objectives. Narrative research is appropriate because this study explored peoples’

lived narratives as they related to a phenomenon or event regarding participant orientation and/or gender identity. Herein, my ontology dictates that reality is constructed via narrative. My epistemology claims that knowledge is captured and expressed through storied lives. My methodology, then, is one of narrative analysis and production.

**Features of Narrative.** According to Creswell (2013), narrative inquiry contains a set of features that define its boundaries, and while not all narrative projects possess these elements, many do. For this study, the primary focus is secondary school experiences. However, as part of the nature of a qualitative inquiry with a narrative approach, participants may share other stories that can still help inform teachers and educator preparation programs. The following features and boundaries of narratives informed my approach to data collection:

- Individual experiences-first person account of events;
- Individual stories-the personal and social interactions of the storyteller;
- Chronology of experiences-an emphasis on the sequence of events;
- Restorying-retelling the participant's story in sequential order.

In this study, I searched for storied experiences that included personal and social perspectives, inherent histories, present experiences, and future possibilities as well as the places associated with each of the experiences. Because of this, I did not adhere to a strict timeline when interviewing participants. Instead, I focused on collecting and analyzing the individual experiences of participants as their individual stories intersected with education. For many participants, this included “restorying,” as many events were told out of chronological order, so I took the participant's story and ordered the life events chronologically.

The procedures for implementing this research design consisted of tethering participant data through the collection of their stories, reporting individual experiences, and ordering the meaning of those experiences either chronologically or using life course stages (Creswell, 2013). As a general procedural guide, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggested that the methods of conducting a narrative study do not adhere to a rigid approach, but instead represent an informal collection of topics. Specific *places* or *situations* were required because the context was important for my telling of the story within a place.

**Types of Narratives.** As to the types of narratives that Narrative Inquiry might produce, a wide range of approaches have emerged in the last few decades (e.g., Casey, 1995/1996). Here are some of the most common:

- A ***biographical study*** is a form of narrative in which the researcher writes and records the experiences of another person's life.
- ***Autoethnography*** is written and recorded by the individuals who are the subject of the study (Ellis, 2004; Muncey, 2010). Muncey (2010) defined autoethnography as a story of multiple layers of consciousness, the vulnerable self, the coherent self, critiquing the self in social contexts, the subversion of dominant discourses, and the evocative potential. They contain the personal story of the author as well as the larger cultural meaning for the individual's story.
- A ***life history*** portrays an individual's entire life, whereas a personal experience story is a narrative study of an individual's personal experience found in single or multiple episodes, private situations, or communal folklore (Denzin, 1989a).

- An *oral history* consists of gathering personal reflections of events and their causes and effects from one individual or several individuals.

While this study sought to construct individual biographies, there was a specific focus on life history as it related to gender identity and sexual orientation.

This research design focused on eliciting personal experiences, whether in single or multiple episodes, that reflected how participants experienced their identities and the intersection of education. Thus, this study produced narratives reflecting a combination of Biographical and Life Histories. Through the interview and data analysis process, I recorded and wrote about the experiences of each participant's life to create a biographical study. This same process of interviews and data analysis was used to create a broad picture that portrayed each individual's entire life. This is imperative because a personal experience story is a narrative study of an individual's personal experience found in single or multiple episodes, private situations, or communal folklore.

This study sought to learn about the educational experiences of LGBTQ+ students through a holistic and person focused approach. Narrative inquiry is often associated with identity development research and critical, post-structural, or other contemporary paradigms. For students who are marginalized and/or identify as sexual or gender minorities, narrative inquiry was an appropriate methodology to center student voices in order to contribute to the field about minority populations and multiple LGBTQ+ identities.

### **Study Participants**

In this section, I describe the recruiting strategies and inclusion criteria for individuals to be included in this inquiry. As this inquiry sought to better understand how students who identify

as LGBTQ experience school in a secondary environment, my recruiting strategy reflected purposeful sampling techniques (Patton, 2015), including purposeful network sampling methods (Roulston, 2011; Saldaña, 2016).

Because I sought to collect *stories* from individuals about their lived experiences, the participants for this study had to take an active role in the research process through collaboration. First, when selecting participants for this narrative study, participants had to self-identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, I recruited individuals who had stories they were willing to share, whether verbally, in writing, or through personal artifacts, and who were willing to openly identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. I expand on the criteria for inclusion below, and my recruiting materials can be found in Appendix A. I shared my recruiting announcement with a few of my former colleagues, and one teacher in particular, Mr. Green was instrumental in distributing information to potential participants. In fact, half of my study participants were referred to me by Mr. Green.

Due to the nature of stories and representing data in a narrative format, my sample size is relatively small. In this study, I had 10 participants who agreed to be interviewed. Each of these participants was selected based upon certain criteria for inclusion. First, participants had to self-identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community and be willing to share their experiences as a student in a public educational institution. Participants could be currently enrolled as a student, but it was not required, as long as individuals were willing to share their narrative experiences in a secondary education setting. While my focus is on secondary school experiences, I did not exclude stories that fell outside of a secondary educational setting.

By centering narratives of current and former students, I hoped to learn new ways to prepare teacher candidates to serve the needs of marginalized groups. Three participants were former students who were either openly gay or trans when I taught them in high school. Another participant was also a former student, but I taught him at the collegiate level. Aside from former students, the remaining participants were members of the local gay community whom personal friends recommended to me as potential interviewees or who reached out in response to my recruiting announcements. Out of the 10 study participants, 7 approached me and asked to be a part of the study.

Participants were only approached if I knew they self-identified under the Queer umbrella, and if I thought they would be willing to share their experiences. At the time of the interviews, six participants were enrolled in high school, one was in his last year of an undergraduate degree at an R1 university, and three were not currently enrolled in school, but had graduated high school within the past seven years and attended some form of post-secondary education or training within the last four years. Below, Table 3.1 outlines the participant demographics.

Table 3.1 presents the demographic information of each participant including how they described their gender identity, pronouns, and labels for sexual orientation. The labels listed reflect individual participant language. Some participants elected to choose their own pseudonyms while others asked me to provide them. All participants identified racially as white.

The following materials are provided in the appendices: recruiting announcement, informed consent, and the interview guide. Appendix A is the recruiting announcement I shared with friends and colleagues. The informed consent form is included as Appendix B. The

**Table 3.1***Participant Demographic Information*

Participant Pseudonyms*	Gender Identity	Pronouns	Orientation
Carter	Cis-male	He/him	Gay
Victoria	Cis-female	She/her	Lesbian
Elena	Cis-female	She/her	Bisexual
Jesse	Non-binary	They/them	Gay
Brad	Trans Male	He/him	Bisexual
Axel	Trans Male	He/him	Pansexual
Elton	Cis-female	She/her	Lesbian
Blue	Trans Male	He/they	“flaming homosexual”
Colt	Trans Male	He/him	Gay
Nate	Trans Male	He/him	Queer



interview guide, or I-guide, is Appendix C. In order to help safeguard participant anonymity, interview transcripts were created but are not provided in the appendices. Many participants come from small towns and the nuance of their individual stories plus the complete interview transcripts would increase the likelihood that someone could identify them. Another step taken to protect participants was assigning pseudonyms to secondary characters. Teachers, principals, family members, and friends were assigned random pseudonyms before being included in the narrative.

In order to conduct research with human subjects, approval by an Institutional Review Board is required, as research with human subjects requires adherence to ethical standards. I submitted this project to the university's IRB, and it was determined to comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects.

### **Data Collection Methods**

In this study, I utilized methods common to narrative research methodology, specifically interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Study design in qualitative research is flexible, so I described any relevant modifications and changes made to the research design along the way. Another reason a qualitative approach was beneficial is because of the nature of interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In order to ascertain the influence of identity in the secondary classroom, participants were asked to reflect on their learning and their learning environment. Collecting data through interviewing participants, both currently enrolled students and individuals who graduated high school or college within the last five years, was an effective

method to learn more about the educational trends among LGBTQ+ students (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Ultimately, this study included two rounds of open-ended or semi-structured interviews with 10 participants. These interviews were intended to last between 45-60 minutes for the first and the second round. Some of the participants finished within 20-30 minutes, while others shared stories and examples for multiple hours. Some participants declined the second round of interviews, and three participants never responded to the request for a follow up interview.

The data collection for this inquiry was in-depth and included individual interviews and group interviews, as requested by the participants; that is, some participants were comfortable talking in pairs while others requested individual sessions. Data sources from these interviews included audio recordings, transcriptions, interview field notes, and a researcher journal. I carried this journal with me to each interview to record my feelings before, during, and after each interview was conducted. In my research journal, I made notes on any aspects of nonverbal communication. These included interruptions, laughter, and pauses among other noted nuances. If there was a story that stood out, or I wanted to underscore, I would make a note of the time and a brief summary of what was said by the participant. Additionally, I used this space to record my immediate reactions following the conclusion of an interview as well as any questions or thoughts. These stories were co-constructed between the participants and me, with varying levels of collaboration depending upon availability and clarity of stories collected.

These first-person accounts were gathered in person and via Zoom, depending upon the preference of the participant. Each time I recruited an individual for this study, I asked whether they preferred a face-to-face interview or if they would feel more comfortable on Zoom or

another virtual meeting platform. If the participants elected to be interviewed in person, I gave them the option to pick the location. Each participant who did not participate via Zoom selected a location where they would already be or where they felt the most comfortable to discuss their experiences. Regardless of whether the interviews took place via Zoom or in person, I recorded each interview using Otter, a transcription software. Otter records the audio and then immediately transcribes the audio. Recruitment materials and consent documents are presented in Appendix A and Appendix B.

For the interview process, I created a basic interview guide (I-Guide) to organize the questions and aid in the data collection process. This interview protocol is included as Appendix B. Because of the nature of collecting stories as data and the process of qualitative interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), some interviews followed the interview guide exactly and some questions were in direct response to the information participants shared.

**Narrative Data Analysis and Synthesis.** The data generated by this project were overwhelming, so in order to be thoroughly analyzed, the data had to be well organized. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using the caption feature on Zoom. Additionally, I recorded interviews on a separate device as an audio file. In order to ensure that interviews were transcribed verbatim, I read through each transcript produced by Zoom as soon as possible. Then, I would listen to the interview and make any necessary corrections or to further differentiate between the interviewer and the participant. Each interview was assigned an identification code by way of pseudonym. As discussed, participants were given the option to self-select a pseudonym or request to have a random name assigned.

These stories were co-constructed between the participants and me, with varying levels of collaboration depending upon availability and clarity of stories collected. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) labeled these types of stories *field texts*, as these stories may be intended as a performance to convey some message or point (Riessman, 2008). As I collected stories, I negotiated relationships, facilitated transitions, and provided support strategies to the participants. In this process of co-construction, the meaning of the stories was negotiated between both parties. For example, after the first interview, I would send participants the transcript and ask them to read it to see if it accurately reflected the information they shared. This process of member checking was particularly important for sections where the audio recordings were difficult to discern. Once they offered revisions and approved the transcript from their first interview, I would then ask participants to confirm if my interpretation was an accurate reflection of their experiences. I then asked follow up questions as needed before moving into a more focused second interview.

For data analysis, several strategies are available. Narrative stories are *analyzed* in multiple ways and can include thematic, structural, or dialogic/performance analyses. For this dissertation, a narrative thematic analysis was used to code data.

**Coding.** According to Glaser and Strauss (1978) coding is a three-step process, so I conducted a total of three rounds of coding for this project, all of which were inductive methods. This process included: 1) in-vivo coding, 2) axial coding, and 3) narrative thematic analysis. During the first round, in vivo coding, open coding (Charmaz, 2014) was used to derive codes from the data. The codes attempted to reflect the essence of the participant's story. This was necessary because while researching this group of participants, it was important to use their own

words to capture their experiences, especially because they could be specific to gay culture. I did this by reading through the data and naming codes based upon words and phrases utilized by each individual.

During the second round, I utilized axial coding. I read through the transcripts again to begin to draw connections between the codes identified from the in-vivo coding. This round of coding was used to identify which codes from round one were the most important and aligned to my theoretical framework, and thus, at this point, codes were refined and elevated to the status of category. For the third and final round of coding, I did a narrative thematic analysis.

Polkinghorne (1995) defined narrative analysis as a process where the researcher identifies themes across stories or taxonomies. This was the final step of the coding process because it required an active process of reflexivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this step, I read through each interview transcript again with the purpose of identifying patterns across the narrative data.

During each round of coding, I had to be cognizant of my positionality because qualitative research depends upon the researcher as a tool (Roulston, 2010); thus, my own life experiences played a central role in the meaning making process. I engaged in exploring my positionality in reference to the phenomenon and the people experiencing it by recognizing how my identity (i.e., gender identity, gender presentation, class, education, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age, language, culture, ability) and contextual positionality contributed to the construction of the research process and findings.

After the second round of coding, I reached out to participants to ask clarifying questions. For example, I would share specific findings with each individual, and I would ask if it was correct and if the claim I was making reflected their journey honestly and accurately.

Occasionally, research participants would agree wholeheartedly, but more often than not, folks would agree but add another level of nuance or context. This iterative member checking added a validity check to my analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Embedded in the participant's story, I gained insight into their life and connected their stories and shared experiences while emphasizing a safe environment and positive relationship (Huber & Whelan, 1999). The key theme of emphasis on the relationship between the researcher and the participant created opportunities for reciprocal learning and change (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Similarly, the researcher-participant relationship can be equated to the teacher-student relationship as both parties can learn and change from the other. While the interview questions focused on eliciting stories about teachers who did or did not make participants feel safe, supported, and affirmed, I did not exclude narratives that took place adjacent or outside of the classroom environment if they were explicitly related to the identity of the participant.

**Trustworthiness and Limitations.** Validity in narrative research usually refers to the strength of the data analysis, in which attention is directed to the *trustworthiness* of field notes and transcriptions of interviews. The goal of this narrative analysis was to “uncover the common themes or plots in the data. Analysis was carried out using hermeneutic techniques for noting underlying patterns across examples of stories” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 177). In narrative inquiry with individual participants, the primary means of developing trustworthiness is member checking. Member checking, sometimes referred to as participant or respondent validation (Creswell, 1994), is a technique used to explore the credibility of results. Data were returned to participants to check for accuracy and to determine if the narratives resonated with their experiences.

From the individual participant data sets, I constructed participant biographies, some more detailed than others based on participant willingness to share. If there were follow up questions about accurate representation, I provided a participant with their biography and asked for comments and clarifications as a process of member checking. Thus, the products of my narrative inquiry, as presented in chapter four, are individual narrative case studies.

Because of the concern about validity and the attempt to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation, I employed various validating procedures. First, transcripts were returned to participants, and then, a summary of the analysis was sent to them. I used participants' feedback to revise my analysis of the interview data. These procedures aided in maintaining the researcher-participant rapport by establishing an ongoing conversation before the conclusion of the study. I used participant comments to revise my analysis of the interview data and ground the narratives in an ongoing conversation between participants and me. This process implemented both perceptions of the researcher and the individual in order to clarify meaning. These member checks helped to ensure a higher quality of research to obtain an in-depth understanding of how identity influences experiences.

The primary limitation of this study, as with most narrative inquiry, is in the small number of participants. However, the repetition of important themes across the individual narratives presents a strong case for the findings presented in chapter four as trustworthy and valid for supporting the implications of chapter five.

### **Chapter Three Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the rationale for a qualitative research approach, described the research sample, and the population from which the sample was drawn. I discussed participants,

recruitment tools, and data collection. I also presented the study design and the methods used to gather this data. I discussed the theoretical basis of the data collection methods implemented, as well as the rationale for those. Narrative inquiry was appropriate for this study because the purpose was to explore the experiences of students who identify as LGBTQ+ and to learn about their identities. In Chapter Four, I present the findings from the analysis of participant interviews and observations. I begin by sharing each participant's narrative before moving into a cross-case analysis organized by theme.



## Chapter Four: Findings

In this chapter, I provide findings from the analysis of the data collected through participant interviews and observations. As articulated in Chapter One, my assumptions and positionality in approaching this dissertation did inform my work, but I remained committed to multiple realities and accurately capturing and representing participant stories.

I begin the presentation of Findings in the form of individual narrative case studies, presented in the order listed in Table 3.1. I then move into a thematic analysis (Reissman, 2008) of patterns or topics synthesized across all the collected stories and how these themes provide a rich, holistic description that ends with an “overall picture of how a system works” (Fetterman, 2010, p. 10).

### Participant Stories

**Carter.** Carter was born in a medium-sized city and at the age of four moved to a town with a population of less than 3,000. Carter is a former student who responded to my recruiting announcement with a desire to share his story and help out a former teacher. At the time of the first interview, Carter was a 22-year-old senior enrolled in a Research one (R1) institution. He is a cis-white man who identifies as “very gay, very, very gay.” Carter was raised in an intensely religious home and attended a Southern Baptist church all his life until coming out as gay. At the age of 12, he first realized that he “was not straight,” and until he came out, spent most of his time “trying to suppress those feelings and those ideas.”

Carter first began to make sense of his own identity through another family member, his gay uncle. Even though they had only met once when Carter was 9, he knew his uncle was gay and that there was “clashing” with their family who did not approve. In an attempt to make sense

of his developing feelings, he first went to his mom. He asked his mom if his uncle was gay. She immediately replied with “Yes, and he's going to hell.” He described this moment as “very black and white...with no wiggle room. [Going to hell] is what’s going to happen.”

Carter’s uncle took his own life on Valentine’s Day, and Carter believes it was “because the family never patched up that relationship.” And although Carter admitted he did not want to go into too much detail about his uncle’s suicide, he did share what was on his uncle’s browser history, including his last Google search. His uncle had been researching how to repair the broken family dynamic and whether or not he was going to hell for being gay.

Feeling shut down and afraid after the conversation with his mother, 12-year-old Carter was also navigating the dynamics of middle school. He attended a small school with only 30 students in his class, and several guys started a rumor that he was gay. Within one week, the rumor was circulating and Carter was subjected to verbal harassment and homophobic slurs from multiple students. During recess, he began sitting with his teachers a safe distance away from the playground and other students. He recalled he would “only sit with them because I was so scared, and they'd be like, “Why are you sitting with us? Go play. You're 12. Why do you want to sit with adults?” And I never told them what was happening.” Eventually, he confided in his mother who went to the school over the bullying.

Ultimately, the school counselor began meeting with him weekly to discuss what happened, and the students who were responsible for the name calling and harassment were “reprimanded” by the principal. Coincidentally, Carter overheard this conversation after a meeting with his counselor. He shared that “the boys that were friends with me got reprimanded. Just when I was walking out [of the counselor’s office], I saw the principal talking about why we

don't say that word, why that's offensive, asking "why is that harmful?" So [an intervention] was there, but they never exactly took an active role in preventing it. You know, they were more of a reactive than proactive approach."

As a result of the negative experiences with his peers, he began to get more and more involved with his church as a way to cope. By the age of 14, he was heavily involved in his youth group, including leadership roles, attending overnight church camps, and traveling to Africa on mission trips. At first, this was very successful for him, as both his parents were youth pastors, and he already felt as if there was "no separation of home and church." However, as time went on, this involvement only caused him to feel more conflicted. He referred to these conflicting aspects of his identity as "kind of...paradox" and described separating himself from his sexual orientation when he explained "The part of me being gay was in the closet. It was the dark part of me I was trying to hide so silently within myself. I was doing all I could to silence it." He knew by his freshman year that he was gay; it was not a phase, and he was too far to turn back.

At the age of 16, during his junior year of high school, Carter could feel himself falling into a depression and decided to confide in his best friend, an out lesbian. He compared this depression to the first time he experienced depression, which was when he was 12, the same year the boys at his middle school were bullying him. This earlier experience added to the fear he held regarding coming out as gay.

And, you know, that made me scared of coming out. This depression was actually really different. This depression was something I could almost, I guess I could visualize a storm cloud out there rolling, and you can tell something bad is coming. So, I'm freaked out by this. But I came from such a small town that I was like, if I come out to anybody, it's out. It's out, and my dad is a teacher. So if I tell this to one of my peers, it touched my dad within a week...it's just bound to happen.

Carter's fear of how his parents and family would react was firmly grounded in religion and how they treated his gay uncle, but after coming out to his best friend, he confided in his brother's wife. He was very strategic about the order in which he confided in people, and he described the process as "like an onion," where he began at the outside of his circle and worked his way in. He believed that his father, described as an ultra-masculine football coach, would be the parent who would go "ballistic," but it was actually his mom. Carter came out to his mother first, but she called his father to come home early from football practice. His sister came to his defense as his mother asked him to consider how his sexuality would fit into God's plan.

Ultimately, his parents kicked him out of the house for the night, and he went to stay with his best friend. Aside from her religious concerns, his mother expressed a lot of concern for his safety and how others would treat him in response to his sexual orientation. He and his family continued to talk through this, and he now describes his mother as one of his biggest supporters after she "got over" that initial rough patch.

Carter went on to share that he did not think he would have survived high school if it had not been for supporting and affirming teachers. One teacher even went so far as to research and attend affirming churches with him after he was removed from his leadership roles in his home church as a direct response to coming out:

It's just education. So there's a lot of misinformation about what being gay is, especially as a child. There's a lot of stigma around it. So working to educate students, you know, why those stigmas are there, or maybe the history of them, or how it's harmful to other people...would be the discipline based approach. That would be more lasting, but also on a more proactive approach, it's just letting your students know that...they are accepted in the classroom, and they are welcome.

He went on to share that teachers should not have any negative opinions about the gender and sexual identities of their students, and that their background should be irrelevant in how the teacher views each individual student.

In each story that Carter shared about the two teachers who positively shaped his high school experience, both teachers made it known that he could come to them to debrief about anything or if he needed help outside of the classroom. He described one teacher as letting him know he was “in a safe space” and he could come to her about anything. Carter felt safe and respected as a student when teachers would not allow any identity-based harassment or bullying.

When he was a senior, Carter experienced another event where he felt unsafe on his school campus. The incident occurred with two other students in the hallway while no one else was around. He had already come out, and because it was such a small school, everybody knew. He remembers walking down the hallway, and while he did not recall what he was going to get, he remembered that class was going on when two boys started running down the hallway and jumping on each other. Carter described immediately going into a protective posture or self-preservation mode through the way he carried himself, refusing to look relaxed. He narrated “One of them jumped on the other one, and the other one's like “Stop!” And no one's around. “That's gay,” and the other guy goes “No, it's not. That's a 'faggot' right there,” and points at me. It was just us in the hallway.” Carter was afraid to say anything, so he kept walking and pretended like it did not bother him.

Carter said there were several supportive teachers, but there were also several teachers who did not affirm identities or provide safe spaces for learning. One teacher at his high school who did not create a safe space was related to him through marriage. Although Carter did not

have him for class, his homophobia was so well known that Carter would avoid walking down the hallway where his classroom was. One instructor who did not provide a safe environment for Carter and other students to learn continuously created a toxic climate where biased viewpoints were allowed to flourish in class discussion.

One specific story that Carter shared was about a university professor who announced at the beginning of the semester there would be no “hot topic” discussions in his class, meaning that students were not allowed to present on anything that got people “riled up” such as gay rights, gun control, or abortion. However, if this instructor were leading the discussion, these topics seemed to always come up. One day, Carter was attending his communications class when the professor opened class by stating he read an article recently that people cannot be gay. That being gay was scientifically not proven, and he then opened the discussion up to the class by asking “What do you guys think about that?” Carter recounted people debating the existence of gay people as the instructor would “just sit there. I remember, very vividly, at the front of class. He would take a seat and just listen to what people were saying.” Another student in that class had post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, and he had a gay brother. There was also a girl in the class who joined the discussion by adding “my bulimia is something that I can't help; he can help that he's gay.” This teacher and this environment were unsafe for all students, especially the Queer and trans students. Carter worked to do everything he could to hide that he was gay. He described changing his mannerisms and acting “like a little walking robot in his class to make sure that [his sexuality] was not apparent.”

Carter’s identity influenced his education through the role of his teachers, peers and friends, and his family. Not only did his identity influence how he interacted with and

approached texts, but every classroom he walked into, he found himself trying to figure out whether the teacher and the class he was walking into was a safe space or not, and that assessment really determined how the semester went for him.

**Victoria.** I first met Victoria when she was 21-one-years old and working on her Bachelor's degree. She was raised by her grandmother in a small town with a population less than 10,000. Victoria is a white, cis-woman who identifies as a lesbian. Like other participants, she grew up in church, attended a private Christian school, and described being a Christian as "such an important part of [her] identity." This private school was Kindergarten through 12th grade. However, due to her family's socioeconomic status, she was on a scholarship. Her family did have to pay for books, and that was "a hell of a struggle." The first story that she shared was from her childhood. Victoria was in second grade when she began to realize that she was "drawn to women." Her realization that "I really want to be friends with girls more than I do boys, but I don't think this is just a friend...there was something there that I remember, even as a second grader, feeling really weird about, especially growing up in a Christian school." As she began to grapple with these feelings, her biggest fear was church and the role of religion.

Even once she made it to high school, she still did not consciously understand her attraction to women beyond the fact that she was drawn to them in a way that differed from men. At her school, there were different days that students attended chapel, and Victoria explained "I would always stay late at Chapel and pray that God, please whatever you do, don't let me be a lesbian." She told this story in a humorous manner and even laughed saying, "I think that probably should have been my first indicator that I was a lesbian...but it just wasn't something

that was talked about. So there wasn't a place for me to fit in.” The first time she was confronted with someone who was both Queer and Christian was when

I started taking voice lessons from a gay man who was the pianist at a church in my hometown. And I think that was the first time I was confronted with someone who was both queer and Christian. At that time, Christian was such an important part of my identity that I never thought I could have both of those things. And when I met him, it was like a light bulb went off. Oh, I can have both of these things at the same time. These [identities] are not mutually exclusive.

Ultimately, Victoria came out after she graduated high school. She experienced another epiphany when she realized “if I do this, if I date this girl, if I give into these feelings that I have, then I can never go back.” Even though she does not regret this turning point, her journey still was not an easy one.

Victoria cited religion as the root of all the identity-based discrimination she has faced, and she “can say that without doubt.” She went on to say that most of her family is supportive, but her grandmother and one aunt were not. Outside of religious beliefs, her grandmother’s biggest issue was that she “felt like she did something wrong. Because she's the one who raised me, she put herself at fault for [my being gay].” Her aunt shared that

To this day she will tell you she does not approve of [being gay]. She will tell you she loves me for who I am. She accepts me. And she loves [partner] to death. But...if it would come down to “Hey, Aunt Jill, do you want to go to my wedding?” [She] would say “no, I can't be there.” Because of religious reasons.

Although Victoria’s aunt and grandmother were the only family members who struggled with her identity, she also experienced discrimination when seeking employment. On two different occasions, she was turned down for employment as a nanny “because I identify as a lesbian.”

When turning to Victoria’s educational experiences, she shared several examples of negative learning environments, with instructors in high school and one university professor. In



high school, she did not have an affirming school environment, as her identity and personal beliefs started to “fall outside the scope of what my school was teaching.” Underlining her enrollment at a private Christian school, Victoria referenced “[homophobic] things were said.” When she was a sophomore, she was conversing about a gay friend who had graduated from the same school a few years earlier when her Biology teacher interrupted the conversation:

She heard me and she said “Are you talking about so and so?” and said his last name and I was like, “yeah,” and she said, “I heard he's gay. Now, is that true?” I immediately knew...that conversation was not about to be good, so I said “I'm not really sure. To be honest, I don't know.” She looked at me and her face got red...she immediately had a physiological response to the fact that this kid had come out as gay. And she said, “If I had him in this room, matter of fact, if I had every gay person in the world in this gym right now, I'd line them up against the wall and I'd shoot every one of them.” That woman is now the principal of that school.

Victoria went on to explain how this woman's continued and current role as the principal still really bothers her, and how “that kind of conversation and that kind of statement was so normal at that school. So normal. There were constant conversations about how all gay people were evil.” This anti-gay rhetoric was passed off under the guise of Christian righteousness and piety.

After graduation she attended a small liberal arts college, when she had a sociology professor who was “full of microaggressions.” This “50-year old white man” would make statements that were “not appropriate to say in front of a class.” These microaggressions included describing women as “butch” and other “racially... or very politically charged” comments. Unlike other participants' experiences, Victoria never hid her identity in class. Instead, she would speak up during discussions and explicitly make it known that she was a Queer woman:

I would say “my partner”...I wrote a couple papers on being Queer and what that looks like in society in the bigger picture, or about Queer theory...,and there were a few times that I was afraid that that was going to impact my grades. Now granted, it never did. I

will say that he was professional, and it never affected my grade in that capacity, which, you know, could have been a lot worse but as far as day-to-day class, he made some really offhanded comments that made me really uncomfortable.

What was worse in her narration was the role this professor played in class discussions. One time she recalled,

A couple instances where another person in the class made some really homophobic comments and instead of saying, “Hey, you can't say that,” he just [either] didn't say anything or he joked along with [the student]. That I distinctly remember. I wish I could remember what [a specific classmate] said, but I do remember having to deal with her later on. I was a tutor, and she came to me for tutoring. I asked another tutor to handle her paper because I didn't feel comfortable doing it.

While this instructor's comments fell under the umbrella of microaggressions and did not include the threats of violence she heard from her high school teacher, Victoria admitted that she felt a certain sense of security in never hiding her Queerness because she “could have gone to HR immediately” and was “really good friends with the dean...and I knew he would have my back if the professor did something retaliatory.”

After she graduated high school, she sponsored a “small after school group with LGBTQ youth” at the local public library. The students in the creative writing-based group shared stories that were vastly different from her partner's positive experiences only a couple years prior. In Victoria's assessment, these differences were the direct result of a new principal who was a Christian pastor. Joking about “gay kids and their English teachers,” Victoria reflected positively that “some stereotypes are stereotypes for a reason.”

In the closing minutes of our first interview, Victoria iterated that “safety is the bare minimum, and any training I have ever done about diversity and inclusion, I have said ‘acceptance is the bare minimum.’” Citing the inclusivity development continuum, and the process of people moving from denial to acceptance and adaptation, she asserted that “to me,

[that process] looks like visibility.” She did acknowledge her potential for bias when again explaining how there was no Queer visibility in her youth, but that never “stopped [her] from seeking it out.” To her knowledge, she did not have a gay instructor until she reached graduate school.

When asked what else she wanted people to know, Victoria expressed that there was “a level of visibility” she wanted to see, specifically, more openly Queer teachers: “I want the people that are teaching me to mirror me in some way” before going on to add that “including Queer literature and Queer media within your teaching” is an important strategy to create a safe space and affirming environment for learning. Victoria found this particularly important because she frequently feels “very straight passing” even when she is with her partner, and this aspect of her identity prompted her to be “more loud and proud” about her sexuality and about who she is because “I get a free pass”: “I have heard so many times ‘But you don’t look gay!’” “Or my favorite ‘but you’re too pretty to be gay.’ Hashtag lipstick lesbian problems, but my clapback is always... ‘are all gay people ugly?’” These examples represented the only times where her sexual orientation and gender identity caused any concerns for her perception of her body image. When asked, she agreed that passing for straight allowed a certain level of privilege; however, that same privilege compelled her to to speak up and advocate on behalf of the Queer community in “anti-homophobic” efforts.

**Elena.** In weaving together these narratives, I began to note more and more connections. Elena, Victoria’s partner, also grew up in the same area as Victoria and Carter, even though I met them each in separate contexts. Although Victoria and Elena attended separate high schools, they both referenced having class discussions, usually in English class, about gay rights, specifically

regarding gay marriage as they attended high school before same-sex marriage was codified into law. Elena is a bisexual cis-woman who began to realize she was not straight in late high school. She describes never having a question about her attraction to men, but when she began to realize she was also attracted to women, she thought it was not possible. She explained that coming to terms with her bisexual identity took years:

Bisexuals weren't talked about as much, like you had to be one or the other. There was no in between. So I struggled with that for a really long time. Because I was like, "Well, I like men, so I can't like women then." It wasn't until probably after college, honestly, that I was finally able to come to terms with [being bisexual].

One of the biggest influences that helped her acceptance was "seeing and having some other friends who were bisexual."

Elena did not come out to her family until after she and her partner had been together for over six months. When describing her family, she interrupted her story to say "it is important to know that my family are also all Democrats and [were] super supportive and have always been super supportive of gay people until I came out." She clarified by explaining it was like "[being gay] was fine until it's your family." Like so many others, Elena's coming out story is characterized by conflict and inconsistencies. Elena's mother kept repeating the phrase "I just don't understand." The reaction was so negative that the two did not speak for two months.

At first, Elena's brother and sister-in-law were extremely supportive of her journey, and they even "played the middleman" between mother and daughter. Even with her brother and sister-in-law acting as mediators, Elena described a verbally abusive relationship where "every time she called it was...to scream at me and tell me that I was splitting up the family, and this wasn't the life that she wanted for me. Just all kinds of horrible things." She went on to share that

she and her mother are “leaps and bounds ahead of where we were,” and while there's “still a few things that can be worked on,” the two have made considerable progress.

About a year and a half later after coming out, Elena’s nephew was born, and she lost the previous support she had from her brother and his wife. Where they were previously close, they now no longer speak unless it is about their mother or her nephew. After the birth, Elena and her partner were no longer allowed to stay at her brother’s home if they traveled to visit her hometown. She attributes this to the influence of her brother’s in-laws, explaining “I feel like there was some influence from my sister-in-law's family that created unnecessary tension with my family, and because of that, [their] homophobia...like [I am] not able to stay at my own brother's house when we go to town.” In fact, with the exception of “one wrong comment from a manager when I came out to her,” most of Elena’s negative encounters have been from her family. Elena’s partner described it as “it seems like since her brother had a child of his own, that’s when things completely flipped for him.”

The turning point in their sibling relationship happened at Christmas when they had a “really big falling out.” Initially, Elena’s brother placed all the blame with his in-laws, but he eventually “backtracked and was like, ‘This is our decision...this is what we're deciding is best for our son. We're still gonna raise him in church.’”

Elena shared examples of positive learning experiences. In high school, when her peers would make inappropriate or homophobic comments, her teachers would quickly “nip it in the bud.” However, regarding classroom instruction, she recalled debates in English class regarding marriage equality. While teachers would not allow slurs or verbal harassment, disaffirming perspectives were allowed to flourish during course discussions. A self-described “athlete

growing up,” her preference for t-shirts and basketball shorts caused “horrible boys” to call her “[Elena]-man.” As a result, she began to “quote unquote start dressing like a girl,” and rhetorically asked “what do we always assume about women who are good at sports?” with the implication that women who participated in athletics and were good, must be gay. Elena reflected on the harassment she experienced in educational settings stating, “It’s even worse when you claim, ‘I’m not gay.’” Over time, she started to feel more comfortable in high school, but she was still “suppressing” her sexuality and described it as “dealing with ‘Am I gay or am I not?’”

Once she graduated high school and pursued an audio engineering degree at the collegiate level, she began to have more and more positive educational experiences. Although she still struggled with her gender presentation and whether or not she should be “super feminine...and not masculine at all,” the majority of her undergraduate experience was not negatively influenced by her identity. One reason was because “several of my professors were in the LGBTQ community. One of my favorites was a gay man who always made me feel safe and comfortable...I remember several of my professors talking about how ‘everyone is welcome here’ and making it a point to call out all the bigotry with that.”

Elena shared a story of her time in college that included specific pedagogical strategies. One instructor had students view an episode of *Queer As Folk* and write a reflection analyzing the Queer representation and discussing any evidence of stereotypes while making connections to other representations of the LGBTQ+ community in the media. She explained that “the baseline that was set” with her professors included “not tolerating...any super awful comments.” One specific instructor who affirmed her was her study abroad professor. Even though “I wasn’t

out to him at the time, I still felt comfortable...as gays we always latch onto people like that, [people] that can give us that space that we need.” She went on to confirm that the teachers who made her feel the safest and most prepared to learn were those who were accessible and individuals who were willing to address and “shut down” any homophobic slurs or comments.

When asked if there was anything else she wanted to share, Elena referenced ongoing anti-gay legislation and advocated for “the exact opposite” of taking Queer representation “out of classrooms and schools.” She argued against fear and advocated for holding discussions in schools regarding minority status as a “fundamental thing.” “At the very least, having Queer literature in your school.” And even though she is “pretty happy” with how she dresses and presents, she “still struggles with internalized homophobia,” as “there’s a constant coming out. It never ends.” Because Elena and her partner are “passing” as straight, she feels as if they are not subjected to as much “discriminatory behavior” as others whose gender presentation represents more androgyny, transgression, or fluidity in existing outside of prescribed gender roles.

**Jesse.** Jesse is a non-binary participant who identifies as “gay, Queer, and non-binary.” Jesse uses they/them pronouns, but went on to explain, “I use they/them pronouns, he/him, either one. Or if anyone wants to [use] she/her, I’m pretty open to all of it. Enjoy all of them often.” Jesse was born and raised in a county with a population of approximately 32,000, and they are an only child. As a child growing up in a small town, their “Queerness and fluidity was...pushed down...and silenced.” They described receiving a lot of “harsh criticisms from peers [and] family members” in regard to their identity.

These influences “really did put me back in the coming out process.” While they tried to bury aspects of their identity, they repeated how “natural” their fluid energy expression was.

They elaborated:

I learned, and [I] was conditioned not to exhibit some of those [feminine] behaviors or some of the things that I...enjoy. So, I feel like in a way, [these criticisms] really did put me back in the coming out process.

Feeling silenced by the expectations of others, they described dealing with a “self-taught self-hatred against [their] feminine energy.” Even though “I tried to hide certain parts of my identity, it was so natural...[that] it just naturally exuded out of me.”

When asked about their parents, Jesse reflected that, “When I was younger...I would say they weren't [supportive].” They clarified that they did not believe this lack of support was “necessarily being hateful...it was more of a worry and...people just weren't as educated.” While sharing stories about their parents, they alluded to the AIDS epidemic. Jesse characterized the lack of parental support as fear: “I think...they [thought] ‘I don't want my kid to get in *that* kind of trouble,’ even though you know, it obviously isn't trouble.” Jesse went on to include that “the early 90s [was] such a hard and crucial time...for the community, on a public level.” In reflecting, they also shared that their mother was very concerned about the type of life they could have in their hometown: “she is worried for me to be gay here. What life could look like for me here.” Their location in a small town seemed to influence how their family approached Jesse's expression and orientation.

Jesse and their family have made considerable progress over the years, and “everything's been an improvement for me. I know some of my friends don't have the same situation.” While “everything is out there” now, this was not always the case. However, as a child and youth, Jesse



did have a few adults in the family who “would let [them] do [their] thing,” specifically their Mamaw and a few aunts. One story they shared was about their Mamaw, who would “ham it up” with them. They narrated:

My Mamaw let me play in her high heels and wear her jewelry. She always had clip-on earrings because she never got them pierced, so she would let me play with all of her jewelry and everything. We would paint my nails with [a] clear coat just because I wanted nail polish so bad.

Their mother would also occasionally “sneak” and let them “do stuff.”

One family member who was not supportive was their cousin. Jesse shared a story of their experience at the family Thanksgiving dinner when they were in sixth grade. They painted a picture of a town in the mountains with gravel roads and “no cell service to this day.” Their cousin would “pester the shit out of [them]...that was his whole personality, and since I was the more feminine one, that was always something that was just easy to go for, especially out there.” They recounted that during a “ten-minute-long prayer,” their cousin

Started whispering [slurs] in my ear, like, the whole prayer, and I'm just sitting there cuz I was raised right. I was waiting until the Amen. And as soon as everybody said, “Amen,” I turned around, and I punched him in the nose, and I jumped on him.

This fluidity and feminine energy caused problems with peers, as “other kids [would] pick up on this or that.” While elementary school was a more comfortable time for them, middle and high school led to others making negative comments. When asked how they would categorize the treatment they received from peers, they summed it up as “harassment.” These behaviors continued throughout middle and high school:

All through middle school and high school people would ask me, “Are you gay? Are you gay? Are you gay?” And I would just refuse to answer because I didn't want to give anyone the satisfaction or confirmation. It's something that [I] hadn't gotten to really, personally have a chance to explore, and most people asking didn't have the best

intentions...So it was always just one of those things that I...literally ignored, like people weren't even speaking to me.

While they were subjected to a “constant bombardment” of harassment from their peers, they did have the support of their teachers, and they felt confident in standing up to other students because “I was definitely raised to learn how to take care of myself.” Jesse, a self-described “teacher’s pet,” was always “close to all my teachers” and “definitely had a lot of support” throughout their educational experiences. If Jesse’s teachers saw or heard something happening, “the other kids would get in some kind of trouble or threatened...most of the time.”

Once they made it to middle school, they found themselves in a physical education (PE) class that was not coed, and it was “ a nightmare...I hated every single second of it.” All of the boys in this class were “competitive,” “aggressive,” and “would try to run over me.” While often the teacher would intervene, there were several occasions where Jesse’s PE and other teachers would look the other way, and Jesse would “stand my ground physically.” One way the PE teacher provided support for them was to allow them to move from the gym to a different space. Once they finished their laps, Jesse could “go back to a classroom and work on homework or just hang out with him and talk about music because I really liked music.”

A couple students in particular would constantly “try to mess with me.” One specific incident occurred on the middle school football field with a guy who “really love[d] messing with me.” When I asked for clarification regarding this particular student and other peers “messing” with them, they admitted there was name calling and slurs. They specified “I feel like fag was the main one”:

He runs by screeching in my ear, saying [slurs] to try to [make] me mad...I'm just...hanging out, and he's wearing a white shirt...and I get him right as he goes by. I

spin around and sling him in the dirt and walk off, and nobody says anything. The teacher [was] right there...[he] got what [he] deserved.

Even with the constant harassment and the difficulty of his journey, Jesse believes they were “fortunate compared to a lot of people’s stories,” and confirmed “I definitely had a lot of support.”

Jesse characterized their coming out process as “a two part process.” First, for their sexual orientation and then later their gender identity. As soon as they went to college, they felt as if they had the space to truly explore their identity. They shared that “moving away, going to college and living my life immediately after getting out of back home and the whole process after that” was essentially a “180 situation.” In fact, at the age of 18 and in a new city, Jesse came out to their friends “almost overnight.”

As they reflected on their story, they circled back to their relationship with family members, admitting that they believe their parents acted out of a place of love; although it was “not executed well...I understand, unfortunately, where they were coming from [and] what their range of knowledge was back then”:

Everybody has such a wider scope of what reality can look like [now], all over the place for all different kinds of people. We didn't really have that [representation] back then unless it was something on the TV.

When I asked if they had any advice for teachers, or if there was anything they wanted teachers to know about people in the gay community, they said “encouragement is everything.”

While they acknowledged that “things are getting hard for teachers as far as what they're allowed to talk about in lessons,” they shared how important it is for teachers to “express allyship,” even if it is “the most broad kind of way in teaching that in their class”:

The little things count...treating other people with respect [is] crucial. Some of the teachers I think of throughout the years [respect] was their big focus...as far as interactions in the classroom.

They went on to say that even if teachers are “not allowed to have that verbiage in [their] classroom” of “people of color, Queer people, gay people,” they can accentuate the “importance of respect and empathy.” Admittedly, there was “a big learning curve for everybody” when Jesse was in middle and high school, but one of Jesse’s teachers who emphasized respect and empathy in their classroom made them “[feel] seen on a different level.”

Now finished with college, Jesse is a licensed esthetician working in a medium sized city. In their mid-twenties, they are much more comfortable embracing their fluidity and femininity. They shared that for the first few years they were out, they struggled with the

Internalized homophobia that goes on in the male side of the gay community, that whole internalized masc for masc. I hate myself for being that way, even...feeling like I had a right to be that way because I was just never masculine, but there was very much the feeling that to be desirable within this community that...I needed to be more masculine, and I naturally like makeup and all that stuff, [but] I was like “oh, no, no, I don't really do that.” This guy I'm talking to is really cool. I'm not gonna let him know I do all my girlfriend's hair on campus...until maybe a couple of weeks down the road.

They described that period as “self-deprecating, looking back,” but they have worked to “get over that and lean more into the fluid person that I [am], that I always was.”

**Brad.** Brad is a transgender male who identifies as bisexual and was born and raised in a small town within a county of around 77,000. Brad is a former student, and at the time of our first interview, he was a senior in high school. This high school was one of two high schools in the district that he transferred to from a larger city. One day, he heard me discussing my project, and he approached me and asked to share his experiences. I remember him saying “I would love to be a part of it.”

I first met Brad the summer prior to having him in my English class when he reached out to me via email to introduce himself. He informed me of his name and pronouns and made it clear that these differed from what I would see on the class roster. I responded immediately and confirmed I would address him by Brad and use he/him/his pronouns.

Brad first began to realize his sexuality around “sixth or seventh grade.” He explained: “I was outed twice in middle school, once in high school. I never got to come out on my own...which sucked.” At the time, there was one girl in particular who would consistently harass him. He shared a story from middle school:

This girl yelled to the classroom that I had a crush on [a] girl in the other class, and everybody was like, “What?” And I [said], “Don't believe her.” This girl used to pick on me all the time. I was like, “Why would you guys listen to her? She does this to me all the time...that's stupid.” I tried to play it off like it was just another way for her to pick on me. Then she went to the other classes and told everybody [there] as well.

Although Brad had begun to come to terms with his sexuality, he was not ready for everyone else to know. His peers continued to confront him about his sexuality, and he denied these rumors “for a while.” Eventually he confirmed his identity and came out as bisexual because it “got so tiring to try to lie to everybody. Every day. All the time. In every class. It was...exhausting...I felt like [I] was lying to everyone that [I] talked to.”

Brad's mother went through his phone and found text messages discussing his sexuality with his friends.

She [asked], “What is this?” And I [said], “Oh, yeah, I forgot to tell you about that.” She [replied], “Well, I already knew. You just could've said something.” But...I didn't get a chance to tell her. Not that she cared. She wasn't mad. She...didn't freak out. She was okay, but I still didn't get the chance to have that moment.

He emphasized that while his mom “wasn't mad,” he still did not experience the opportunity to have “that moment” where he made the choice to come out to her. By the end of middle school,

he was out about his sexual orientation, but he was still in the closet regarding his gender. He outlined two distinct parts of coming to terms with his identity, first his sexuality and then his gender. He was hesitant to describe his experiences as “harder” than others, but his journey was “more complicated, especially in middle school.” He went on to explain that once people found out about his sexuality, they “just put me into a category for [about] two years,” only for him to later realize “I was something completely different, and it's definitely put some bumps in the road.”

By the time Brad reached high school, he had realized he was a transgender male, but he was “still in the closet.” Similarly to his experience in middle school, Brad did not have the opportunity to come out as transgender either. He was once again outed by a peer. During his freshman year, he was a member of the ROTC program when he was outed as transgender. While he was not sure how this came about, his instructors “brush[ed] it off.” He believes they “didn’t want to discriminate, but they also couldn't legally put me with male categories...because of physical reasons,” and the program was “very separated, female and male.” Ultimately, these instructors ignored his gender identity, and he claimed to be fine with it as he was not ready to come out as trans anyway.

When asked how he would describe the process of coming out, he summed it up as “complicated” and “just a mess.” However, one aspect that helped him was finding supportive friends. He admitted that it was “definitely harder to find a bigger friend group of accepting people” in a small town, but that he had recently made some new friends who were also members of the LGBTQ+ community. He cited them as one of the reasons he is able to “feel...more comfortable with being out to classmates and teachers...[they] made it easier to be

more open about the situation.” While he did underline the importance of Queer friends and other supportive allies, he also shared several examples of peers who were not affirming. Once he came out as transgender, he “lost friends” and was subjected to verbal harassment in school and online. He described that certain students “disassociate[d] themselves” from him when they “didn’t use to.”

Many times, his peers would “mumble under their breaths” about how he was different, misgender him, or dead name him, and there were several times he was subjected to slurs. He said that “faggot” is one slur that gets “thrown out there pretty often, especially because me and my boyfriend are both trans men.” He went on to say, “I don’t ever tell anyone about my boyfriend [anymore]...Because I feel like, the more people know, the more they're gonna judge.” He shared a story where he posted a picture with his boyfriend on social media, and he received a lot of negative comments from online friends. He remembered many people responding to his post with “being gay is a sin. You're condemned to hell. Your boyfriend is as well.” He said people would even make “trans comments. Like, they'll say, boyfriend in quotation marks as if he's not a boy, which doesn't make sense.” He also shared that he felt a certain pressure to conform and “fit into [the] binary” and certain “masculine stereotypes.” Other students would make negative comments about his appearance because “boys [do not] dye their hair pink.”

By the time I had him as a student, he was not closeted regarding his gender identity or his sexuality orientation. In fact, one assistant principal even helped him to come out to his teachers and another provided him with a key to a one stall bathroom. He was out in all facets of his life and had emailed each of his teacher’s regarding his name and pronouns. As his instructor,

I would hear students misgender and deadname him, but he always ignored them. In regard to this he explained:

I try to just kind of let it go. A lot of the classmates that [misgender me] this year...got to know me sophomore year before I transitioned. So, I just kind of tend to ignore it because some people just don't adjust and some people don't believe in [being transgender]. Some people just don't understand. So I just kind of tend to ignore it.

When I asked him if misgendering him was something that he would a teacher to address within the classroom, he seemed to consider:

Probably. If [they were] saying it in a purposefully hurtful way instead of just not realizing it, then maybe briefly, [but] a lot of them just don't realize that they're saying the wrong thing.

When I asked him about his current teachers, he informed me that certain teachers refused to use his name and his pronouns. One teacher was reminded repeatedly. He “reminded [her] and corrected [her],” but it was as if she was “still not gonna care.”

He admitted this had an influence on his learning because he would not always respond to his dead name because he did not realize he was being addressed. He explained that “when this teacher is talking to me and they call me by my birth name, I don't always register that. I don't realize she is talking to me.” One time when using his dead name, he finally realized she was referring to him, and “she yelled at me for rolling my eyes while dead naming me again. She kept doing it over and over again, almost like she could tell that it was bothering me.” He went on to say he was supposed to have this same teacher again the next semester, but he planned to change his schedule even though he would “love to learn the skills in that class.”

It makes it very hard to learn and hard to feel equal to all the other students when I know that [teacher] is purposefully discriminating against my pronouns and my gender. It's definitely not a fair game.



He characterized this learning environment as “stressful,” stating that he did not “have time for that” because he was “trying to learn and trying to graduate.” Throughout our interview, Brad kept returning to education and how important it was for people to “educate themselves.”

**Axel.** Axel is a transgender male who identifies as pansexual. When I first met Axel, he was a freshman at the school where I taught. I never had him as a student, but he was referred to me by a friend and colleague in the English department, Mr. Green. One day, Axel and another participant approached me in the hallway. I remember both students seemed nervous but excited. The pair informed me that Mr. Green had told them about my dissertation, and they wanted to be a part of the project. We spoke briefly about the details, and they scheduled an interview.

Axel was born and raised in a county of approximately 77,000 and attended school in two separate districts within that county. He described a mixed level of support and safe spaces throughout his educational and familial experiences. By the time he made it to middle school, he started to realize he did not fit the mold of straight or cis. Ultimately, he realized he was a trans male “about last year,” after his boyfriend came out as a trans male. The two were already dating and both presenting as female when

I discovered that I started feeling more and more uncomfortable with being a female. So I went to my sibling, and I was like, “Hey, I think that I might prefer to be called he/him,” and I asked for some name suggestions. We all went with Axel.

Axel’s sister is a trans woman, and the first person he came out to. He said, “I’m not out to my mother or father. I’m out to my sister and my grandmother on my dad’s side.” He noted that his grandmother is bisexual, and while she and his sister are “supportive,” he described the rest of his family as “homophobic.”

Even before he began to explore his identity, he knew he was different. He described his hometown as a “very country, very God loving, religious place.” Attending middle school in this town was a difficult and fearful time for him because “there was only me, my boyfriend, and then one other gay kid at school. The rest of the kids were just very strictly homophobic, transphobic, or extremely religious.”

When he was in the seventh grade, Axel had a teacher who would “stand up in front of class and say he did not believe in gay marriage; he thought that [being] gay was a sin.” Axel was subjected to constant harassment from teachers and peers alike:

I could not go down the hallway without being called a gay slur, being told I was a sinner and I was going to hell, and there's nothing I could do about that. People would actually try to fight me and my boyfriend.

Eventually, the constant threat of physical violence became too much, and he went to a teacher:

I said, “Hey, this kid keeps harassing me.” But I couldn't specify what for. I couldn't say that “this is homophobia. This is not okay. He's threatening me because of my sexuality.” So I had to [say] “Hey, this kid won't leave me alone. He's bullying me and my boyfriend's dead name at the time.”

He said the teacher made the student leave him alone “for the day, one day,” but never did anything else about it. He “couldn't come out to any of the teachers there,” and this “kid was using it to his advantage.” He went on to say, “I had to sit with that kid every day in class, knowing that he was thinking about hurting me or doing something to me and my boyfriend.” When I asked about any support at his middle school, Axel explained, “we couldn't get any help. There was one accepting teacher there, only one. And I didn't even get to have that teacher...So we didn't have any help from anyone at that school.”

Around this same time, rumors about his sexuality began circulating. He remembered getting “treated differently” after the rumors started going around. He shared that,

I was dating my boyfriend, but at the time we were both [presenting as] women...and as soon as that rumor started going around, I saw that teachers were treating me differently. They would look at me differently. And I just wish I could be treated equally. This year isn't as bad, but I still feel like if I came out to certain teachers, they would be like, "No, you are she/her."

Before the end of eighth grade, Axel moved one district over, but his boyfriend remained through middle school and now attends the only high school in that same district. He expressed a lot of guilt over leaving his boyfriend: "I feel bad that he's still in that environment...I'm not gonna say [he] is more weak, but he is a little thing," and he is "a little fragile." Axel went on to say that "I tried to get my boyfriend out of that," but now that he is in high school, he "has more friends that accept him and support him."

As a high school student in a different district within the same county, he admitted that "even though I know this place isn't nearly as religious, I've just carried that fear here." As a result of that fear, Axel did not come out as transgender to all his teachers. The concern of acceptance from his high school teachers was amplified by the fact that his mother is a hairdresser in the community:

I'm very worried about certain teachers and people that might know my mom because she's a hairdresser. And I don't want them to go to my mom and [say] "Hey, I know [Axel] and at school, they [use] he/him."

He went on to assert that his mom would "be so mad" if she found out he is transgender. His mother is very strict about the clothing he wears and the manner in which he styles his hair:

She always tells me "you better not turn out like your sister. I'd hate for you to turn out like your sister. God gave me a girl, and I have a girl. You're not gay, and you're not a boy." I [came] home with a new jacket...because I thought it looked cool. It felt like a letterman jacket but black and white and had checkers on the inside. And she went on a whole rant about how I can't wear men's clothing.

Another fear he shared about his identity influencing his education was if a teacher is “against that,” then they could “put that onto your grade, and you have no choice in that.” He also shared that he struggled with “the fear that [teachers] will call my parents.”

Out of the five teachers he had the semester of our interview, he was only out to two of them. Not feeling safe enough to come out to his three other teachers, he confirmed he went by his dead name in those classes. However, this proved to be difficult because “I completely forget that's my name. Someone can say [dead name] to me, and I'll have to process that that's what I go by.” One of the teachers he did come out to was Mr. Green, the same teacher who referred him to me. The second teacher was Mr. Smith:

I came out to Mr. Smith because he called me by my dead name, kept calling me she/her, and I was getting so uncomfortable. I had my friend tell him about [being trans] because my friend knew him better.

Axel was pleasantly surprised that both teachers he came out to were supportive and asked, “Why didn't you tell me sooner?” He explained “I'm not comfortable with telling people sooner. I'm afraid of how they'll react.” He shared another story about a teacher who made him feel “uncomfortable” because the teacher “separate[d] [students] by gender.” He admitted that he was not out and Mr. Brown “had no idea that I wasn't uncomfortable, but he gave the girls pink papers and the boys blue papers.”

When asked to elaborate on the teachers who made him feel supported or safe, he began by describing a teacher from the previous semester as one of “the most accepting teachers” he had ever met, but even then, Axel relied upon the support of a friend to come out to the teacher. When I asked about Mr. Green, Axel said he “just doesn't care. If you tell him your name and pronouns, [that] you're gay, or whatever, he just doesn't care. [Mr. Green's approach] is like

‘Alright, that's cool,’ and then he'll support that.” When I asked what he meant by “doesn’t care,” Axel elaborated that “he's very respectful about everything...he doesn’t care in the sense that he is okay with [being gay or trans].” One of Axel’s most affirming moments came from Mr. Green:

One of my happiest times this year was when he gave me back a paper that had Axel written on it. The first time he did that I screamed I was so happy. Like, I was in the middle of the library, and he gave me a paper and I went, “This says Axel.”

He contrasted this experience with other teachers. After explaining how happy Mr. Green’s support made him, Axel observed that “then some teachers are just sitting there going ‘No,’ and it's also like they have that *look*, and you can just tell because...they have that judgmentalness.” When asked what he would like to see, Axel responded that support would be “people that make other kids stop the constant bullying.”

When I asked him what else he wanted people to know, he addressed the issue of bathrooms and transgender people:

I hate having to walk into a place and worry. I walked into a McDonald's bathroom one time; I was on my way to the beach with my family. I was wearing a really loose-fitting shirt and some basketball shorts because I don't like my body. And a woman walks in and has to stare at me...she looked me up and down to make sure that there’s not a boy in the women's bathroom, and that made me so uncomfortable. I worry that I’m going to walk into this place, and people are going to point me out. I worry that something's going to happen to me on a daily basis.

Noting that his story took place in the female restroom, I asked for clarification on why he did not use the men’s restroom, and he admitted that he was “too scared. Because I know as soon as I walk in, people are gonna be like, “Hey, you're a girl. You don't belong in here.” Ultimately, Axel tries “to avoid using public bathrooms...as much as I can.” He emphasized how worried he was about his physical safety and explained how he changed his actions: “If I'm at a store, I will

look for a family bathroom, or I'll wait until there's no one in the bathroom to go in, and if someone walks in, I...avoid walking out where they can see me.”

Now a senior in high school, Axel has a plan. He explained that whenever he is “about to come out” to his mother, he is going to “move in with [his] sister.” He ended our conversation with “Treat me equally.”

**Elton.** Elton is a cisgender female who identifies as a lesbian. She also uses gay as a label. I first met her when she was a freshman in another English teacher’s class. Mr. Green, her English teacher, knew she was gay and after describing my study, he referred her to me. Initially, she reached out to me via email, and after conversing briefly, we scheduled our first interview, which took place via Zoom. I remember she had COVID, but she did not want to wait to come back to school to get started. I was impressed by how excited she was to participate, and I was in awe of how confident she was in her identity. Our second interview was face to face and took place a few weeks later.

Elton was born and raised in a small, rural town. She opened up our conversation by explaining, “I’ve always known. It’s always been there.” When I asked her about the coming out process, she asserted that, “I didn’t really come out”:

My parents went through my stuff, and they figured it out for themselves. They weren't really hostile about it, but they also weren't...okay with it. It was kind of like, it is what it is. It's been like three years, I think, since they found out.

She first started to conceptualize this aspect of her identity “when I was a child.” She admitted that “I didn’t know what [being gay] was, but I always knew that I preferred women over men,” because “it's just the way it was, but I didn't realize that [meant] gay or anything; it was just

there.” She continued, “So I’m out to everyone. Not all of them are accepting.” She further characterized her “family [as] okay.”

With the exception of her family, Elton claimed she was “always open about [her sexuality].” Once she started school, she started being bullied: “People know I’m gay, [and] I’ve been bullied since pre-k. Because I’m different.” By the second grade, “I got rocks thrown at me.” My immediate reaction was “Why?” She responded: “Because I was gay. And everyone knew it. So then I dated my best friends who knew I was gay. They were okay with it, and it made it look like I was straight.” When I asked her how she responded to rocks being thrown at her, she hesitated before saying, “Um, threw them back?”

It was in the sixth grade when Elton’s parents went through her stuff and discovered she is a lesbian. They went through her belongings “because they have always had this attitude towards [being gay] where they’re not very accepting”:

They use gay and the F slur in a comedic way. So that’s where my route of *not* telling them came from, and they didn’t understand that; they still don’t understand why...they still continue to [use slurs] even after me telling them that it makes me uncomfortable.

One set of Elton’s grandparents “ridiculed” her “because [being gay] is a sin, and I’m going to hell for it.” She went on to describe these grandparents as “Bible thumping,” and “one time I had to read the ten commandments ‘til I cried.” While she acknowledged that this was as a “punishment,” she quickly cracked a joke about “religious trauma.” My horror must have been evident because she humorously commented, “Built different. This is why I’m in therapy.”

Throughout her education, Elton has been subjected to hearing gay in a negative way and being called a “dyke.” She went on to reveal, “I just ask them if they’re referring to me as a lesbian or a wall. Because there’s a version that means a wall. I’m like, which one?” As she

continued to narrate her experiences, it became clear that she used humor and logic as coping mechanisms:

See what you do is you just ask them if their fabrics match, or if they've ever cut their hair or pierced their ears...Premarital sex anyone? Anything that's altered is considered a sin.

Continuing to discuss her interactions with peers, she recounted the “biggest bullying...that [she] ever received.” While upperclassmen were permitted an hour-long “open lunch,” freshmen had to report to the auditorium for the first thirty minutes and work on assignments or just sit there.

Not only was this incident the “biggest,” but it was also the most “recent”:

One of my most recent [experiences] actually happened last semester in the theater when all the freshmen still had to be in there. There's this kid, and we were sitting there. [My friends and I] were just talking, and I made a joke about me being gay, and he asked me if I'm gay. I go, “Yeah, you got a problem with that?” and he says “Yeah, I'm gonna pay someone to beat you up.” He never did, but he was threatening me with intent to harm me. Then when we got up...to leave he did that jumpscare thing, where you go like that [demonstrated gesture]. It didn't faze me. I was like, “cool bro,” and then we told the principal, and they didn't really do anything about it. They said, “Okay, we'll talk to them” and then nothing after that.

She expressed that “[administration] didn't care. They talked to him...basically [told] him ‘Don't do it again,’ and then he went on his way.” Not only did Elton “not feel supported,” but she confessed that “[administration] is an ongoing joke.” She confirmed that this was a “one time thing,” but then the same student “got switched into my English class, and he would always glare at me, which was not fun.”

Elton also conveyed her distaste with censorship and “education in general.” Referencing a state bill that has since been passed into law, she announced the “[lawmakers] trying to pass [the anti-LGBTQ+ bill] are acting like there is already enough [Queer] representation in our schools that we're learning about, when literally, there's nothing.” She cited Anne Frank's diary:



They took a whole section out of her diary, [the section] about her being in love with her best friend who was a female. They took that whole section out because it's not appropriate for school, and they've just taken...any kind of representation out [of curricula]...it doesn't make sense.

When I asked Elton what could make her feel safe at school, the focus was on her instructors:

Teachers learning...small ways to incorporate things that let people in the classroom know that they're safe, and that they don't care even if [personally] they do have a problem with [LGBTQ+ students].

She explained this would look “like going to work...and being professional.” She followed this by advocating for a separation of personal beliefs and professional actions:

Being professional about [LGBTQ+ students], not bringing your own opinion into [the classroom] because in all honesty your opinion doesn't belong in [someone's orientation or expression]. You can have your own opinion but don't say [anti-gay beliefs] to someone and be hurtful.

She referenced Mr. Green as a teacher who made her feel supported. She first described that Mr. Green “just doesn't care.” When I pressed for specifics, she pondered for a moment and added, “It's not like he's like, ‘Ehh, whatever.’ It's like he is accepting,” but with a lot of teachers, “you have to wait it out...and see how it goes.”

Another school support Elton referenced was the Gay Straight Transgender Alliance (GSTA). While she is in GSA, a lot of her friends cannot participate in the club because the school required “a parent signature” for a student to attend any club or take part in extracurricular activities. Elton wants teachers to remember “don't stereotype people because everyone is different, and don't make assumptions.” She ended our discussion by arguing for equality and student safety:

So that way everyone has a safe place. [Students] feel safe and everyone's included somehow, and it's not a situation where you go to a [classroom], sit there and think that "Oh, this might happen, so I have to plan ahead for that."

**Blue.** I first met Blue a few years before the start of this project when he was a freshman in my English I class. His case manager, and my co teacher, transferred him to our Inclusion section from a self-contained, or pull-out, Special Education English class. He went on to earn the highest grade in our English class. I remembered Blue as an outstanding student who excelled in written expression and class discussions. During our interview, he reminded me, "I have a learning disability," and thanked me for never making him read aloud in class. While he never came out to me in any facet, I did suspect he fell under the Queer umbrella.

Blue is a trans male who uses he/they pronouns and identifies as a "flaming homosexual." When I asked if I could quote him on that, he quipped "Oh, yeah. There's nothing straight about me." He further explained that while he considered himself bisexual and asexual, he preferred to use gay, noting dryly, "That's a fun combination, so I just call myself gay personally." Blue was informed of my dissertation research his junior year when he had a friend and colleague, Mr. Mercury, for English III. He approached me one day during lunch, and we scheduled our first interview.

When I asked Blue to share a story about his experiences with his gender identity, he began by describing his childhood. He reflected upon his youth as an idyllic, genderless time in his life:

I never once ever thought I was a girl. It never once crossed my mind...Yes, this is what standards were held up to me...but there's a lot of things that I just never really understood about *why* I had to do these certain things.

As a child, this became evident through his passion for baseball. Blue began playing baseball at the age of five. A member of an all-boys baseball team, his experiences soon became gendered. He was on the same team from kindergarten through the fourth grade, and he was “the only girl on the team,” but he fondly recounted that “there was no difference between me and everyone else on the team because we were all just the same.”

For a while, no one made any difference between him and the other players. He continued, “I wasn't seen differently.” His first memory of a gendered experience was the result of another player:

One of the boys on the team made a comment about how a girl shouldn't be playing on a baseball team, and the coach at the time was like, “Well, she's better than all of you,” and he made the guy wear all pink during our next game. He wasn't very happy about it, but he kept making comments.

In fifth grade, Blue was forced to switch to softball, and “hated it. I hate softball. I love baseball. Baseball was my life.” Continuing to remember his youth, he shared that he “never liked anything girly,” and “always fit in better with the boys.” When he started “thinking about [gender], it was like ‘Oh! This makes more sense.’” He claimed it was “never a question” that he was a male because it “just made more sense.”

When I asked about his family, he shared that “I came out to my mom once,” but she “just ignored it.” Interestingly, his mother is “very supportive of the LGBT community...and was raised by her uncle...knowing he was gay.” However, when it comes to Blue, “it's like a blind eye.” While his mother “does not force femininity” on him, “it's just a subject that we just don't touch.” He admitted that “she knows...we both know,” but he equated the status of his gender identity with his mother to a “don't ask, don't tell” situation.

He elaborated on his relationship with his mother by making connections to his “birth name.” His mother named him after “her mother who died when [Blue’s mom] was really young.” He feels conflicted about going by Blue because “I don’t want to get rid of it, but it also isn’t me...the name is very dear to me. Just doesn’t fit.” Blue is “never spoken at my house.”

When I asked him about his teachers, he immediately launched into a story about his Science teacher, Mr. Magneto. He shared that he and his friends had been on the receiving end of “several homophobic comments”:

So, me and a few other friends went to Mr. Magneto cuz he's really nice. Now, this boy, who was saying sexual comments about my friends, and other girls, and he's making those comments about me, and I'm like, whatever, but he's being homophobic.

While Mr. Magneto was receptive to their concerns, he encouraged them to take the issue to the principal, Mr. Rolling. Blue admitted that the group did not take the issue to Mr. Rolling because “he’s known for being homophobic.” Having heard rumors of homophobic administrators, I asked if he could give an example. He shared a story of a student-principal advisory group he was a part of. Including Blue, there were a total of five students on the committee, one of whom was the same student Blue and his friends had gone to Mr. Magneto over. He explained that the other students “[were] asked to do a bunch of questions,” but he and his friend Summer, who is openly bi/pansexual, were excluded from answering the questions. Blue believed this to be a direct result of their Queer identities.

Blue admitted that he was known for “being gay and nothing else.” I was the first teacher he came out to about his gender identity. He said he does not correct people and goes by his birth name in most of his classes. As a result, many of his teachers misgender him. He did share that two of his teachers only used his last name: Mr. Mercury and Mr. Smith. He explained:

But I do think Mr. Smith knows. For some reason I think he knows. I don't know why I think he knows, but I think he does. Almost like he just has a way. He calls me by my last name...but other students, he goes first name. He just always addresses me as Oakenshield.

When I asked him if he was okay with going by his last name, he said, "Yeah. Don't mind my last name," but he confessed "I'm actually thinking about changing my last name to my mom's maiden name...it's a cool word, and it isn't attached to people who don't like me."

Blue's fear about sharing his name and pronouns was amplified because he had classes with a cisgender friend who went by her middle name, and "a lot of teachers don't respect that."

When reflecting on what a teacher could do to make him feel supported, he focused on the beginning of the year and "back to school" activities:

At the beginning of the year, you know, the "nice to meet you" papers, where [teachers] get to know you. Where there's like the name that's on the roster and then the name that you go by. And then, pronouns. I think that would be very helpful.

When discussing other school supports, he admitted that the GSA was "too big of a group" for him, and although it is called the Gay Straight Alliance, "people seem to get...zeroed out forever." He went on to say, "I [already] look different. I don't need to give you confirmation."

**Colt.** Colt is a transgender male and another participant who was referred to me by my friend and former colleague, Mr. Green. Colt seemed apprehensive about approaching me regarding the interview, so he brought a friend along for our initial meeting. His friend, and co-participant Nate, had no qualms about approaching me, speaking up, or participating, and he took a consent form as well as he quipped, "I was always gonna do it." Colt seemed nervous about the interview, but he made it clear he wished to participate, and after a brief conversation, he asked if he and Nate could be interviewed together. Both agreed they wanted to be interviewed at the same time. I explained the potential drawbacks of being interviewed together, but they ultimately

decided they were fine with sharing stories in front of the other, even going as far as to joke about how they already know everything about one another.

Colt identifies as a “Queer, trans boy.” He shared, “I’m queer. It’s just an umbrella term for I don’t like labeling. So...Just gay in general.” While seventh grade was when Colt realized he was a boy, he shared that it was before then when he had “a gender crisis.” He described his first conceptions of gender as “a behavior when he was younger...in games, I would pretend to be the boyfriend.” He said he was not sure if that had anything to do with being transgender, but he always preferred to be male characters. Colt is “not [out] to some teachers, but [his] parents know.”

Colt moved to the area from out of state about one year prior to our first interview. He first came out to several of his previous out-of-state classmates, and “surprisingly, my middle school class was really accepting. Teachers were as well, the ones that I told.” Around the same time, he came out to his parents. In regard to support, he voiced, “my parents not so much.” His mother’s first reaction was “it’s a phase”:

“You’ll get over it. I felt the same things.” You know, dumb stuff like that. I literally told my mom, “I’ll tell you when it stops.” Of course, I’ve never told her anything since then. And [anytime being Queer or trans comes up], she would always play the victim, that she is the one who is upset or whatever. And the entire time I’m just thinking “Shouldn’t my happiness matter in this kind of situation?”

Colt said his mother is more concerned about her “reputation” than his happiness. He went on to explain:

My parents don’t care about me. They just care about what reputation they have as a parent. For a long while, my mom wouldn’t let me wear more masculine clothes because she was like “It shows how I am as a parent,” until just eventually, she, you know, gave up.

The struggles with his mom and stepdad have continued.

After finishing middle school, he and his family moved to a new state before he began his freshman year of high school. He remembered the car ride during their move when his stepdad asked, “What’s all this deal with you wanting to be a boy?” And even though Colt told him, “I don’t really want to talk about this right now,” his stepdad continued: “So what, are you going to try to construct some kind of penis?” Colt described feeling “so sad” after that, and while the conversation made him “shut up,” his step-dad continued with support from his mom. His mom and step-dad started “saying stuff about toxic masculinity”:

“You don't even act like a boy. You don't like things boys do. You're emotional. That's not like a boy,” and I'm just like “Okay.” I couldn't respond...I couldn't say what I wanted to say cuz I'm scared of him, but what I was mostly thinking was not all boys are like that, and we need to get rid of that toxic masculinity stuff.

In order to cope, “I just don’t communicate.” He went on to share that “I don’t know if it’s true, but my friend says there is a bunch of emotional abuse.” Colt repeated, “I don’t know” and immediately followed up with “I haven't really been to any professionals about anything. I don't know. That house just makes me feel like crap. My stepdad, I don't know because he belittles everybody, and I don't know how to describe it.”

Colt noted that the “only family member who has been supportive, who has actually tried to use my pronouns and my name is my dad,” but his dad “doesn’t even live with us,” and his “mom doesn’t like him.” Colt does not correct his mother or stepfather when they misgender or dead name him, admitting, “I'm too scared of my family to really try to do anything.” When I asked him what he was afraid of, he said “I don’t know. I’m just a coward...I can’t [make them].”

Since coming out, Colt’s relationship with his father has been “overwhelmingly accepting. I didn’t expect it at all.” His father even shared with Colt that “I used to think I was

gay.” Colt elaborated on how this disclosure from his dad was different than when his mother said she too had gone through “a phase” when she was younger. He explained that. “My mom did too. But I don't know, it meant more for my dad, who was actually, accepting.” His dad uses his name and his pronouns “willingly enough to want me to be happy.”

In reflecting on his educational experiences, Colt realized one aspect of his middle school experience that differed from high school was the amount of students. He reflected: “In middle school, I had the same class for three years. So I wasn't exposed to new people who might not be accepting. I just had one class that was fine.” He alluded to a small community where all the students grew up together and stayed in the same class groupings throughout middle school. As a high school freshman, Colt was new to the school and the community. When I asked him about his teachers, he first responded, “I don't think teachers are the issue...I'm saying the kids are the problem.” However, after this comment, he then went on to share stories about teachers who misgender him and do not use his name.

Because this was a group interview, I asked both participants if they could share a story about a teacher who supported their identity. Another participant, Nate, immediately said, “Mr. Green and Ms. Burger.” While Colt agreed with Nate's assessment of Mr. Green, he disagreed with the answer of Ms. Burger. He elucidated: “she won't call me by name because she thinks it's inappropriate. She's like ‘I'm sorry.’ So she just calls me by my dead name and the wrong pronouns.” Due to the association with guns and the weapon brand, Ms. Burger will not call him Colt. because it is not appropriate for school, but when I asked about the rationale for not using his pronouns, he admitted, “I don't know...because it would be weird to say my dead name and then he/him, I guess.” Colt's friend and another participant, Nate, made it a point to share “[but]



the first thing [Ms. Burger] did was hand us a slip that said, ‘What are your pronouns?’” Her support lasts “until she’s like ‘I’m sorry. I can’t call you Colt,’” because of the association with firearms.

Out of Colt’s four high school teachers, he came out to two of them: Ms. Burger and Mr. Green. Although Ms. Burger knowingly misgendered and deadnamed him, she asked him “when you come up with a different name, tell me.” Mr. Green had no issue with Colt’s name and always uses his pronouns. In fact, Mr. Green was the first teacher who used his name, and that made him feel “respected” and “supported.” He described coming out as “stressful” and “awkward”:

That’s why I didn’t [come out] until one day, Green overheard me saying “I hate my name.” He’s just like, “Bro, do you go by something else?” And I’m like, “Colt, but you don’t have to call me that.”

Colt characterized his experiences with his teachers as mixed, with varying levels of support. One class he does not feel safe in is Wellness. He categorized the teacher’s behavior as “confusing.”

Coach Heath, I don’t know if he’s homophobic or transphobic. It’s really hard to tell because on one hand, he’ll act like super against it. But then also sort of not against [being gay or trans]. So it confuses me.

The topic of the LGBTQ+ community came up during their break one day:

He said stuff like...“We’re supposed to love each other,” and all that crap. And [he] acts like, oh, I’ll accept you for whoever you’re, but I’ve heard of other instances where he’s said stuff otherwise. But I don’t know if it’s true, because other people told me about it.

Colt went on to say that he is not afraid of rejection, but he is afraid of “some people” because of their potential for “physical violence,” and at his last school, “[administration] don’t do anything.

I was being sexually harassed. We recorded it three separate times, nothing happened”:

Dude, the principal lied to me...in middle school when all that happened. He said he was gonna call every kid's parent that was involved with this kid who was sexually harassing all these other kids. No matter gender. He never called anybody. I asked everyone, "Did the principal call your parents?" And they said, "No." I asked my mom, "Did the principal call you?" She said "No". So I was like, "That's not cool."

He shared that he is "signed up" for the GSTA, but that he no longer attends because "it's overwhelming. It's only because of how energetic everyone is in [the meetings]. It's not their fault." While he does not participate in the club meetings, he emphasized how "nice" everyone was and how "the teacher from the GSTA club...was trying to help me feel better, like normalize it. She said, 'I've heard of dogs named Colt. It shouldn't be that big of a deal.'"

It's funny because the story behind my name is...I was gonna be named [Colt] til my grandmother made my mom change her mind to my dead name. So it's kind of a funny story.

Sharing this story seemed to prompt a new memory about his peers. He rapidly changed gears exclaiming, "Oh, wait! I forgot. They were making fun of my name being like, "Who could be that obsessed with guns to name themselves Colt? It was like on a Discord server or something. I don't even have Discord."

Unfamiliar with Discord, I asked him what it was and how he found out what his peers from school were saying. Discord is an instant messaging social platform where users can call, text, and share files. He had a friend on Discord, but "they didn't do anything. They just brought up my name...and then their online friends [asked], 'Who would be that obsessed with guns to name themselves that?'"

[My name] is not from that. My mom, her explanation for that name, before I was out and she [still] liked it, she was like, "It's supposed to be punk." It's funny cuz I told my mom, "I'm changing my name to Colt when I get older." She was all for it til I came out. Which I find funny.

In regard to coming out to peers or other students, he mentioned that “I don’t tell anybody anything. I don’t tell them unless the student is gay.” Colt also connected this to his appearance: “But also, sometimes I look so androgynous...to the point where people don't even want to talk to me because they don't know what I am.” He continued with a discussion of how “unpredictable” his peers are. Following up about the teacher’s role in his safety at school and in the classroom, he repeated that “teachers are not the problem.” When I asked him if he would want a teacher to intervene when witnessing homo/transphobic behaviors, he seemed to consider it: “Yeah, maybe? I just don't know. Because kids are unpredictable. They're the worst.” He paused to laugh and reflected that, “I say kids, [but] I'm younger than most of them. I don't really care if they're still children.”

Colt is conflicted about how much a teacher can do. On one hand, he believes a teacher could make a difference: “Yeah, hopefully.” However, he expanded on this stating, “I'm like, you can't change their mind. They're always going to be jerks. It's hard to deal with.”

**Nate.** Nate is a transgender male whom I first met at the very end of his freshman year of high school. He became a study participant through his friend, Colt, and his English teacher, Mr. Green. Yet again, another student self-identified for my study because they felt safe enough to come out to Mr. Green and, subsequently, he referred them to me knowing I was recruiting participants. During Nate’s interview, immediately after, and as I worked through his interview transcripts, I realized his story was challenging me in a way that differed from other participant biographies. Before I share Nate’s narrative, and purposefully the last narrative I present in this chapter, it is important to briefly acknowledge my positionality. Nate’s experiences were difficult for me to represent because our similarities did not merely lie in coming out or existing

while Queer. Nate and I share other commonalities in our familial relationships including drug addiction and intervention from outside agencies.

Nate and Colt determined they wanted to be interviewed together, so we scheduled a time that worked for all of us. It quickly became evident the pair were friends and provided support for one another. Initially, Nate struggled to “put a label on [his sexuality] because I thought I was bisexual.” Expressing his distaste with the system of labeling, he said, “I don’t like labels” or the connotation of certain identity terms. He does claim “Queer” or “gay” as “umbrella term[s]” to describe his orientation and “trans...transgender FTM” for his gender identity.

From the time Nate was a child, he knew he was a boy. The first story he shared was from his time in elementary school. He remembered:

I always role played as a boy in games. I remember I used to have a YouTube channel where I would post really dumb videos. And there was one video I [said], “Sometimes I feel 90% boy and 10% girl,” and then my mom told me to delete the video because that might spread wrong ideas. I was like, “Okay,” but I was too young to understand what she meant.

Reflecting on the timeline of his gender experiences, he knew he was transgender by the time he was “ten. Actually, I knew before that, but ten was when I figured out the label.” Nate shared about his journey: “it’s kind of hard to [explain] really. It’s not even about accepting [being trans]. It’s just confusing”:

[Looking] in the mirror, I’m like, “This is not right.” But I [could] not figure out *what* about me was not right. But now that I know that it’s because...I wasn’t born as the right gender. So I’m like, “Okay.” I know that now.

At the time of our interview, Nate had already been out for years. He began by sharing where he is now in regard to openly expressing his identity: “Honestly, I’ve been trying to tell everyone who doesn’t know.” Nate’s statement was interrupted by his friend and co-participant, Colt:

“Yeah, cuz you’re also confident.” Nate confirmed he was further along in how he approaches communication around his identity because of the amount of time he has been out as trans and Queer. He acknowledged, “Yeah, but I’ve also been out for four years now. So if anybody has been calling me by my dead name or anything, I’m like, ‘Hey, don’t do that.’”

When Nate first came out to his family, “it was not very good.” He recalled four years ago:

My mom. So I don’t know if I can say this, but [around] four years ago, she was like, really bad...she’s clean now. But she was really bad on drugs. And she would...she hit me a lot, and my family basically disowned me. Now all I have is like immediate family. And I lost a lot of friends, and the school now is...finally learning how to accept people like that. But, you know, when I first came out, it was, we were still kids and very young.

Nate lives with his mother and his grandparents, and he did not categorize their relationship as supportive or even receptive. All of them dead name and misgender him. In response, Nate ignores them when they do not use his name. He explained, “I don’t listen to them. If they don’t call me Nate...[and] they yell at me... I’ve been upstairs, and they will be downstairs, and I won’t answer.”

In addition to this, Nate has done research and made attempts to educate his family, but “they genuinely do not want to try to”:

I’ve given them resources, like *so* much resources. I’ve talked to my therapists and psychologists about...resources in general, no medical transition or anything, but they still refuse to look at anything...I went as far as to literally, like, I got a Google Doc, and I got every single term that I could possibly think of, and I wrote it down, and I put full, in depth definitions, and they still did not read it. So now every time I talk about gender dysphoria, or something, they have no idea what I’m talking about.

Nate’s experiences with his family were so bad that he made multiple attempts to take his life.

One of his attempts prompted a visit from “the people for mobile crisis.” Mobile crisis informed his family “that if they don’t call me by my name, since I’ve had like, attempts, then they will

take me out of the house, because it's making me actively suicidal.” While Nate felt as if he was receiving the professional support he needed, he also underlined how infuriating his family’s approach was.

Turning to Nate’s experiences in the high school setting, he shared varying levels of harassment and a spectrum of support. His very first day of high school was characterized by conflict:

I've been harassed so much in my life. I, oh, my God, my first day of school here, like the very, very first day, I walked in the boys’ bathroom. Biggest mistake of my life. I literally got harassed in there...some kid almost hit me because I was in the wrong bathroom. So he told me that he was, he told me to drop my pants right there and show him like, that I'm not a dude.”

When I asked him if he reported this incident, he firmly repeated, “I don’t want to.” He

continued to express, “I don’t want to. Because I’m scared of people...of physical violence.”

Nate elaborated: “Also, this school is so useless. I’ve reported three different things this whole school year, and they've not done anything.” Similarly to his family, he felt the school’s administration did not “really try,” going on to say, “they really don’t try to do better. I always hear them asking for suggestions to make the school better, but they never follow through on them.”

Asking about Nate’s teachers, he cited “Ms. Berger and Mr. Green” as teachers who were supportive of his identity. Until the day of our first interview, Mr. Green was the only teacher who ever used his name:

Now that I think about it, I've never heard a teacher besides Green use my name. Well, actually, my math teacher said Nate for the very first time today, and...he's never even called my name. He's never even made eye contact with me because he does not want to say it, say he/him or anything, but he said it today because he's going down the line and making everyone talk. So he just kind of went, “Nate.”

Where Mr. Green was described as “so nice,” Ms. Berger was “iconic.” Ms. Berger’s icon status was a result of the information sheet she handed out to students at the beginning of the semester.

Nate excitedly remarked:

You know what? I also think it would be really helpful if teachers, like when I was in Berger’s class, [on] the very first day of school, the first thing she did was she handed us a slip and it said, “What are your pronouns?”

This question would be helpful “because awkwardly asking your teachers to go by a whole nother name in front of the whole class is so nerve racking.”

While Colt problematized Nate’s characterization of Ms. Berger’s allyship with his experiences, he also reminded Nate about a conversation they had the day before our interview.

Referencing GLSEN’s annual Day of Silence, Colt prompted Nate:

Yesterday? The announcement about the vow of silence for the LGBTQ rights stuff? You said people in your class laughed. Martina said people laughed in her class as well. Everyone just stayed silent in my class, because they're too scared of Coach Heath.

Nate replied with, “Yeah. Mostly...Mr. Murray, like when everyone was laughing, he wouldn't say anything, [he] just kind of looked at his desk.” Nate argued for teacher intervention to help students feel safer at school, noting, “It's also better because if a teacher says something, it makes them stop, like, they won't do it again.” Originally, Colt did not agree with Nate’s assessment of teacher intervention, claiming their peers would “just do it somewhere else.” Eventually, however, Colt ceded his viewpoint after agreeing with Nate after they discussed the difference between a student being “homophobic or transphobic...every day” in every class versus a teacher explicitly addressing anti-LGBTQ+ behaviors. Nate argued that, “if they don't do it in one or two classes, [a teacher intervened] and then that's why.”

Another aspect of the school environment that Nate brought up was representation. He advocated for “more LGBT recognition,” and referenced the “LGBTQ section in the library,” as being “so small.” He sarcastically remarked, “Here, representation!”

### **Cross-Case Analysis**

In analyzing these stories as a collection, several themes appear prominently across the individual narratives. I address seven here: a) Religious Trauma, b) Queer Representation, c) Coming Out versus Being Outed, d) the Role of a Friend, e) Unsafe Spaces, f) the Role of Administration, and g) Bullying and Harassment.

**Religious trauma.** “It’s a sin.” “You’re going to hell.” The first theme I identified in my cross-case analysis was a direct quotation from many participants: religious trauma. I noted three subcategories for religious trauma: 1) judgment and rejection, 2) fate, 3) religious beliefs as a justification for violence and abuse. Religion played a role in multiple participant stories. Many times, religious beliefs dictated how participants were treated and received by others. The role of religion recurred through most participant stories, some more explicit than others.

Ultimately, every participant either shared a story about a negative religious experience, or they cited religion as a justification for abuse in their interpersonal relationships, whether physical, verbal, or emotional. Carter was removed from every leadership role he held in his church because of his sexuality, and his mother asked him how his sexual orientation fit into God’s plan. Victoria tried to pray the gay away, while her partner Elena was not allowed to see her nephew because her brother and sister-in-law were raising her nephew “in church.” Axel’s mother repeatedly told him that his identity was wrong because “God gave her a girl.” He also



was subjected to a public-school teacher who used the classroom to explain why being gay was a sin, and “homosexuals” would be “going to hell.”

Elton’s grandparents used religion as a punishment and made her repeat the Ten Commandments until she wept. Both Axel and Elton had peers verbally harass them and use religion as the basis. Axel shared, “I could not walk down the hallway without being called a gay slur and told I was going to hell” because he’s Queer. Many participants were shunned or rejected by teachers, peers, and friends because of the religious beliefs these individuals held. Judgment and rejection and religious rhetoric were prevalent, especially the motif of sinning and going to hell.

**Queer Representation.** The next theme was Queer representation. The idea of representation took multiple forms, but there were two primary categories under Queer representation. The first category of representation was a local, embodied Queer experience, or in other words, access to another gay person. The second category of representation was access to LGBTQ+ characters, history, and ideas. This encompassed the role of representation in media and popular culture as well as Queer representation in school curricula, including library access to content that represented the LGBTQ+ community.

The first and most prominent category was knowing and interacting with another gay person. Carter had a close friend who was an out lesbian, and he strategically relied upon her for support in his coming out process. Victoria remembered her piano teacher and an older graduate of her school as examples of what was possible as a Christian and in her hometown. Elena struggled with her bisexuality because of the lack of bi representation she had access to. As a direct result of the binary homo/hetero system, she believed those were the only options. She

also argued for more representation in course content and classroom discussions. Jesse referenced the media and the possibilities of differing reality throughout his interview. He and his mother used to watch *Will and Grace* and consume other pop culture media with Queer content that helped him and his mother understand that other options, other lived experiences were out there and could be possible. Elena referenced *Queer As Folk* and openly gay college instructors who made it a point to include and to welcome everyone to their class and the campus.

Axel's story emphasized the role his boyfriend played on his identity after his boyfriend came out as a trans male. His boyfriend's identity represented another possibility. In analyzing Elton's story, it seems she may have played the role of gay friend or openly Queer person in her local community to several others. She spent time arguing for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ content in school curriculum and shared her disgust with censorship of Queer content and themes. Colt and Nate both mentioned the importance of video games where they were able to explore their gender and use the digital world to create possible representations of their identity and future selves. They also criticized the amount of representation available in their school's library.

**Coming Out Versus Being Outed.** Several of the participants in this study did not have the opportunity to come out before others either guessed their identity or went through their personal belongings. As such, the process of coming out is the next theme. The categories for this process included the following: a) the idea of Queer paraphernalia or artifacts identifying individual's sexuality, and b) peers harassing or bullying individuals based on their perceived differences.

Carter was able to officially come out to his friends and family on his own accord, but years before he did, other students were already harassing him with gay slurs. Jesse was interrogated by their peers at school constantly and did not feel safe enough to come out until they moved away to college. Their classmates perceived a difference before they even had a chance to contemplate or accept their identity. Jesse described this as the other students “picking up on their energy.”

One of Brad’s classmates started a rumor about his sexuality in the sixth grade, and then his mom went through his phone and discovered texts discussing his bisexuality. He never had the opportunity to choose to share his story. Elton remembers always being out, but in elementary school, she dated a friend in order to pretend to be straight. By the time she was in sixth grade, her parents went through her room and figured out she was gay because of her “stuff.” What was a cool jacket to Axel was a men’s only jacket to his mother. Other participants shared stories about physical possessions that represented their identities and informed others of the owner’s status as a member of the gay community. These examples led to the development of Queer paraphernalia as a thematic subcategory.

**The Role of Friends.** As participants shared their stories, another strategy for navigating educational contexts began to repeat. This was the role of friends in educational contexts. In Axel’s and Colt’s stories, they relied upon their friends to communicate with teachers about their identities. This action of approaching teachers on behalf of friends was more prevalent with trans participants. For example, Elton “dragged” Mr. Brown and Axel out into the hallway one day. Once the two students and teacher were in the hallway, Elton said, “Now tell him,” and Axel did. Mr. Brown was supportive, and somehow Elton knew that, but Axel’s fear was too great to do it

on his own. Teachers needed to know in order to address the student appropriately, and in multiple examples of trans experiences, students were afraid to come out to the teacher as trans, correct their teacher's pronoun usage, or request to go by a name that differs from the roster. Axel and Colt were both comfortable enough and felt safe enough to allow their friend to disclose this information on their behalf.

The support system of friends showed up in other ways as well. Sometimes the friend group was used to commiserate and share negative experiences. Occasionally, a friend had a positive experience with a teacher and would share that experience with to let their friend group know this teacher was a safe space. Colt fondly remembered how he and Nate bonded on the first day of school because they were both gay and trans. Colt walked right up to Nate and asked him, "What are your pronouns?"

Jesse's best friend was responsible for a turning point in their journey. At 18, they came out as gay to their friends and family, but they had yet to explore their gender identity. One night they were hanging out with their best friend. They remembered riding around for a while and then just sitting in their car. They remembered their friend saying, "I see your soul. You're so beautiful." This friend went on to tell Jesse that she saw them, but it was a different version of them where they "weren't a man or a woman." This moment was a "surreal" moment for Jesse, and while they admitted that "after they came out as gay," they had "had the thoughts for a long time...about the gender spectrum," this moment with their friend really "accelerated" this process.

**Unsafe spaces.** Every study participant had at least one story where they felt unsafe in an educational setting. These unsafe spaces were either because of peers or unsupportive teachers.

Carter was afraid of several students in his middle school who repeatedly harassed him and called him gay slurs. In high school, he avoided a specific hallway because he was afraid of an openly homophobic teacher. In the stories shared by Brad, Axel, and Colt, three teachers were aware of their names and pronouns but continued to misgender and address them incorrectly. Axel and Colt both shared examples of apologizing to their teachers on behalf of their identities. Seeming embarrassed that Mr. Green had overheard the conversation about how much Colt hated his birth name, he told Mr. Green that he did not have to call him Colt. Both Axel and Colt shared at least one example where they apologized to teachers as an immediate response to their names or pronouns.

Brad did not share this same experience as he came out to all of his teachers via email at the beginning of the semester, but he did report feeling unsafe and distracted by the lack of respect for his pronouns and the constant use of his dead name by over half of his instructors. Victoria was horrified by her high school teacher who advocated for violence. The science teacher and now principal announced she would line “every gay person in the world...up against the wall and I’d shoot every one of them.” Jesse’s parents were afraid of what might happen to Jesse in their hometown, but they did have support from their teachers. This support from their teachers took many forms, but ultimately classmates made up the majority of their unsafe experiences. Axel, Colt, and Nate all shared stories about being harassed and physically threatened at school. One space in particular that was a problem for them was the bathroom. When discussing their safety and their fears regarding school, both Colt and Nate repeated, “I don’t want to be hate crimed.”

Teachers were labeled as unsupportive if they did not make students feel safe in their classroom. This included using a student's name and pronouns. Teachers were also considered an unsafe space if they did not address anti-LGBTQ+ behaviors. Nate and Colt shared examples of students laughing at the National Day of Silence and making disparaging comments, and the teacher just sat there. In Carter's experience, the teachers were only a few feet away from where other students were calling him gay slurs and no one intervened. While Jesse was allowed to stand their ground physically without fear of school disciplinary actions, their teachers never addressed the name calling or bullying they were subjected to.

Carter, Victoria, and Brad all shared their fear of a teacher retaliating via grades because they were gay. Other participants the power these teachers held over their day to day school life and their grades. Each of the trans participants had at least one teacher who used the wrong pronouns and dead named them. Brad and Axel shared stories where they were reprimanded by the teacher because they did not reply when they called on them, but they did not recognize the teacher was speaking to them due to the teacher's use of their birth names.

**Role of Administration.** Ineffective administration was another theme present in the interview data. Six out of ten participants attended the same school, and the other four all attended separate institutions. Regardless of the school, this theme was prevalent across the data. Two participants at the same school described the principals as "an ongoing joke." Three more participants from the same school shared stories about how the administrators "did not care" and did not respond to their complaints of harassment and bullying. The principal "didn't do anything." "The principal lied to me." One participant had been repeatedly sexually harassed by a peer. When he went to the principal, he was told the principal would be calling everyone's

parents “regardless of gender,” but that never happened. Nate mentioned going to his counselors and teachers about issues, but then once the problem made it to administration, nothing was done. Elton had a student threaten to beat her up after school, and the assistant principal said they would “talk” with him, but it never happened. Carter’s experiences in middle school got so bad that his mother had to intervene. The principal did speak to the students who had been bullying him on the playground, but they were never reprimanded.

**Bullying and Harassment.** Every participant shared at least one story where they had been subjected to discrimination and harassment or bullying as a result of their identity. These experiences were broad and represent a range of microaggressions, verbal harassment and abuse, homophobic and transphobic slurs, intimidation, and physical violence. Carter, Jesse, Axel, and Colt were frequently called “fag” or “faggot” whereas Elena, Victoria, and Elton more usually heard “dyke.” All ten of my participants reported hearing “gay” or “homo” in a negative way. Supportive teachers addressed anti-LGBTQ+ behaviors and rhetoric. They respected students’ identities regardless of whether they were lesbian, gay, bisexual, Queer, questioning, pansexual, or transgender.

Carter was repeatedly subjected to verbal abuse in the form of homophobic slurs at school. This group of boys was allowed to continue this behavior until his mother went to the school. Victoria and Elena reported that many folks did not believe they were partnered or that they were romantically involved with another woman. This harassment took the form of, “But you don’t look gay,” or “You’re too pretty to be gay.”

Elton said she had been bullied her entire life. One of the physically violent incidents occurred in elementary school when she had rocks thrown at her because she was gay. In high

school, a male student told her he was paying someone to beat her up after school. Both Axel, Colt, and Nate reported being harassed about their genitals from peers at school and even parents at home. Blue admitted that he was not in GSTA because he “already looked different,” and he did not need to give other students any “confirmation” or further reason to bully him. Similarly, Colt commented on his appearance, mentioning that his more androgynous appearance made most students and occasionally some teachers avoid him because they do not know “what I am.”

#### **Chapter Four Summary**

In Chapter four, I presented the individual narratives of each participant. These narratives represent a biographical study of each participant. The first four biographies presented were Carter, Victoria, Elena, and Jesse. These four participants all attended separate institutions for secondary education, while the last six, Brad, Axel, Elton, Blue, Colt, and Nate all attended the same high school at the time of our interviews. Chapter 4 concludes with a cross-case analysis with seven primary themes.



## **Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications**

In this chapter, I begin with a discussion section returning to the general context of this research before offering implications based on the findings presented in Chapter four. I discuss the implications of these findings as they relate to practice and research, more specifically within the safer space framework. The implications for practice are focused on the following areas: 1) LGBTQ+ students and their home lives, 2) the role of peers and friends, and 3) suggestions for developing a Queer affirming pedagogy and a safe space. I conclude with implications for future research and a chapter summary.

### **Discussion**

In addition to the record-breaking number of anti-LGBTQ+ bills and laws referenced in Chapter Three, LGBTQ+ adolescents are at a disproportionate risk for distress and abuse (Gibbs, 2015; GLSEN National School Climate Survey, 2019). A meta-analysis by Friedman et al. (2011) found that Queer youth report higher rates of mental illness (King et al., 2008; Mustanski et al., 2010), abuse, violent victimization, bullying, suicidal ideation, (Lewis, 2009) and self-harm (Almeida et al., 2009) than their heterosexual peers. Compared to non-LGBTQ+ students, gay and trans youth are more than five times likely to report suicidal ideation (Almeida et al., 2009), and recent findings suggest that LGBTQ+ adolescents are five times more likely to report previous suicide attempts compared to their cisgender counterparts (Hatzenbuehler, 2011). 25% to 32% of transgender children and young adults have had at least one previous suicide attempt (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007). It is within this context I present my implications for practice and research.

This study builds on current scholarly definitions of safe spaces (Arao & Clemens, 2013; GLSEN, 2019; Hunter, 2008). In synthesizing the literature, and as fully defined in chapter one, a safe or safer space is a physical and metaphorical space that is comfortable and familiar. Multiple facets must be implemented in order to develop a safe space. The first requirement is a specific time and place in a location that is physically comfortable. The second requirement is physical safety. The location must guarantee all members are free from bodily harm and physical threats to their person. Physical safety is mandatory in order for students to experience the next requirement of emotional safety. Emotional safety provides students with a sense of belonging and security. Emotional safety may help to decrease some of the anxiety Queer and gender nonconforming individuals face in a classroom setting. Fourth, the environment encourages students to take risks. Finally, while not in the literature, I would add the fifth and final requirement of a safe space is freedom of expression and identity.

Designed to capture student voices about safe and unsafe spaces in high school, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What stories do LGBTQ+ students tell about their educational experiences?
2. What strategies do LGBTQ+ students use to survive in secondary educational environments?

### **Prevalence of Religious Trauma**

An overwhelming finding in my study, not yet taken up in the research, was the role of religious trauma in narrating Queer experiences. Participants reported being subjected to harassment, rejection, physical intimidation, and violence as a result of others' religious beliefs. These adverse religious experiences occurred in the home and at school. While literature on the

experiences of sexual minority Christians is growing (Goodwin, 2022), limited research centers the damage inflicted on the emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being of Queer folks and the grit the gay community possesses (Mosher et al., 2019).

According to the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, LGBTQ+ youth are more at risk for trauma than their straight peers and experience forms of trauma that include familial rejection, bullying, physical and sexual harassment, and hate crimes (Barba et al., n.d.). This increased exposure to trauma and adverse experiences (Levenson et al., 2021) leads to higher rates of mental illness, a direct result of stigma and prejudice from society (Winell, 2008), which typically includes religion. Although there is a lack of literature studying the influence of religious culture on trauma in the LGBTQ+ community, there are multiple studies that examine the relationships between sexual orientation and trauma experiences (Parra & Hastings, 2018, Travers et al., 2020, Roberts et al., 2012, Dentato, 2018). Additionally, there have been studies on abusive clinical practices, primarily conversion therapies and efforts to change sexual identity. These barbaric practices have and continue to be supported by certain religious communities and are related to the clinical “treatment” of sexual orientation and gender identity (Dessel et al., 2017).

Religious trauma is far more prevalent than research suggests, and the adverse religious experiences that have been investigated focus on the relationship between these occurrences and mental health outcomes in the LGBTQ+ community. Goodwin (2022) conducted a systematic literature review on the impact of religious trauma on mental health outcomes in the LGBTQ+ community and found 17 research reports that met these parameters. All of these studies demonstrated that adverse religious experiences were manifested by microaggressions and abuse

within a religious setting, rejection based on sexual identity, conflict between religious identity and sexual identity, and extent of rejection of religious practice throughout an individual's life. Goodwin continuously noted the scarcity of research on religious trauma and the LGBTQ+ community. More specifically, Goodwin argued that this phenomenon requires much further research in assessment, prevalence, and treatment in Licensed Clinical Social Work. Likewise, educational research has taken up trauma-informed practice (Clements et al., 2022) and the influence of homelessness on educational outcomes, but not with Queer students who are survivors of religious harassment and/or violence or the intersection of educational outcomes and religious trauma.

### **Implications for Teachers**

In analyzing the individual narratives as a collected whole, I now present implications relevant to teachers and teacher educators, regarding the role of family and home lives, the role of peers and friends, and suggestions for developing a pedagogy that creates and sustains a safer classroom climate for all students. In each section, I address how these various people did or did not create safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth and how this relates to educators. Teachers need to be aware of a multitude of issues concerning their LGBTQ+ students. To start, teachers must possess a rudimentary understanding or basic knowledge of minoritized populations. This begins with the risks these students face.

Overall, students, teachers, and administrators were reported as being unwilling to recognize preferred pronouns and chosen names, as well as stopping homophobic bullying and harassment. Transgender, gay or lesbian, and bisexual students were less likely to report the presence of key school supports, to be engaged in school, or to report a high-grade point average.

All participants reported being the target of verbal victimization at school by their peers, and many reported physical victimization as well. As a result, they were less likely than their heterosexual counterparts to report feeling safe at school and more likely to report experiencing chronic sadness and contemplating suicide (Gibbs, 2015; GLSEN National School Climate Survey, 2019). Teachers need to be aware of the mental and physical health risks that Queer and trans students face as well as be reflective about their role in students' lives.

As participants in a dominant ideological society, educators must constantly reflect upon their praxis and engage in a cycle of self-reflection and analysis. If the gender identity and sexual orientation of students is disregarded, educators risk not only doing harm but also missing key facets of an individual's experience that influence their ability to succeed in educational settings (Butterwick & Egan, 2010; Swartz & McGuffey, 2018). By better understanding the LGBTQ+ journey from an Intersectional Queer framework, a more holistic understanding of how destructive or marginalizing ideologies persist is exposed and, perhaps, how they may be weakened and eventually broken down.

Teachers must maintain an open mind and be willing to engage in learning about themselves and others while seeking to develop knowledge of, acceptance of, and pride in all literacies, languages, and cultures (Barton & Tan, 2022). It is imperative that teachers engage in regular critical self-reflection about inclusive curricula and activities. Engaging in such dialogue might be uncomfortable and challenging, but if teachers engage in introspection, they can model this approach in their course and ultimately open dialogue in the classroom (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007). As teachers seek to center student agency and support students on their journey to becoming advocates for their learning, issues of systemic and structural oppression across

intersecting identities must be explicitly addressed, beginning even during teacher preparation. Centering the school as a community for collaborative learning and a site for social change (Laughter et al., 2022), engaging in difficult dialogue is necessary to encourage multiple perspectives, to disturb existing hierarchies, embrace the importance of context and the non-neutrality of language, and agree that learning is under construction and evolving. One possibility to open up dialogue in classroom contexts is by implementing the above framework of a brave space, especially when establishing discussion norms (Arao & Clemens, 2013). From the prevalence of participants' religious trauma to the role of discussion and classroom norms, I now turn to the implications of this study, specifically focusing on what teachers need to know and what action steps they can take to move beyond a safe space into a brave space and affirm all students regardless of their intersecting identities.

**LGBTQ+ students and home.** Teachers need to know that many Queer and trans students may not have the support of their families. This awareness is important because home is not always a safe space for LGBTQ+ students. Any identity that creates a fear of retribution and concern for individual safety is traumatic. Therefore, being Queer in today's society is traumatic. Unlike some aspects of identity diversity, Queer individuals, especially youth, cannot typically rally around their family of origin to gain support in their sameness and shared identity. In fact, many members of the community, including nine out of the ten participants for this study, experienced various levels of rejection from their families of origin.

This rejection represented a spectrum from dismissal and avoidance to verbal and physical violence. Two participants used the word "disowned," and two participants were kicked out of their homes. Because of this, Queer relationships can develop rapidly. They may be

characterized by passion and possess a sense of “You get it!” These Queer relationships can then be fortified by the inherent trauma bonding, which can be confused for emotional intimacy at times. Apart from rejection and abuse, students’ families may lack the required knowledge or resources to support their children. As a result, teachers of Queer students must work toward authentic support for the LGBTQ+ community.

The lack of support participants reported from their families and guardians varied and could best be described as a spectrum. Teachers need to be aware that their students may be subjected to being kicked out or disowned, misgendered, shunned, and abused by their families as a result of their stereotypical ideas about gender and purported “Christian beliefs.” These religious beliefs were used to uphold harmful ideas about gender, gender roles, and sexuality and even physical violence.

Teachers need to be aware of the role that religion plays in the private and public spheres, as grounded in the research synthesized above. Participants repeatedly reported religious trauma in their school and home experiences. Primarily, peers, parents, and teachers used religion as a justification for, at minimum, a lack of support and, at worst, physical violence. Teachers need to be cognizant of their subjectivities and how their personal identity intersects with their professional teacher identity. Outside of their personal and professional identities, teachers also need to understand how the religious beliefs of others can impact their students, particularly how peers and families weaponize religion as a justification for verbal and physical abuse.

When focusing on the learning experiences of Queer students, teachers need to remember the personal history and life experiences, cultural artifacts, and prior learning that each person brings to the learning environment. Student life experience should be valued; new knowledge

and meaning can evolve from these experiences (Lindeman, 1926). Multiple participants reported being outed by others, whether through rumors and harassment from their peers or families and guardians going through their belongings, so teachers need to be aware of the potential harm this experience can have.

Coming out or being outed is an emotionally charged time for anyone, and it could be especially challenging for a learner. This may lead to students who experience confusion, internal conflict, frustration, and discomfort, all of which can manifest differently in classroom behaviors. Participants commonly reported absences or contemplating ways to avoid school. More frequently students used masking behaviors as a coping strategy. Meaning, they changed their affect or tried to hide certain identity aspects. Others disengaged from their learning entirely.

**The role of peers.** Teachers also need to be aware of the role of peers. Peers may fall into three categories: 1) supportive friends and allies, 2) peers who avoid and/or ignore, and 3) unsupportive peers and bullies. The first peer group teachers need to be aware of is friends and allies. This group played an instrumental role in making LGBTQ+ students feel safer and more accepted at school, as demonstrated particularly in the narratives of Colt, Elton, Axel, Brad, and Carter. In many stories shared by participants, this group was pivotal in communicating with teachers on behalf of their Queer friends. In several instances, another Queer student or ally came out to a teacher for their friend. This was in a helpful way and happened with the individual's consent, most frequently with trans participants who were being dead named and misgendered by their teachers. Friends and allies were also willing to stand up for their peers and intervene in instances of harassment or homophobic bullying. This group also provided a sense



of community and acceptance, a safe space where Queer students could be themselves, whether in the cafeteria lunchroom at “the gay table” or walking around campus. This was evident in the interview data and the fact that four participants wanted to complete their first interview with a friend.

The second group of peers fall in between the allies and antagonists. They do not vocally participate in homo-/transphobic rhetoric or behaviors, but these peers do make it a point to actively avoid students they know or consider to be LGBTQ+. These students make up a more silent group, but they are willing to witness anti-LGBTQ+ and be passive bystanders. This is important for teachers to know when considering group work or student projects. Although these students may not be vocal in their disdain or beliefs, participants made it clear that they know who these students are and that these individuals are avoiding them because of their identity.

The final peer group includes students who actively bully and harass Queer individuals. These students are extremely vocal and often threaten or engage in physical violence when interacting with LGBTQ+ students. Teachers need to be aware there are students who not only verbally harass and intimidate others because of their gender or sexual orientation, but there are also students who are willing to engage in physical violence and hate crimes. While I will discuss the teacher’s role in intervening and addressing these types of behaviors on school grounds in the next section, it is important to know that many minority youth may not have a supportive family or home environment, and some may not have friends and allies at school. LGBTQ+ students are susceptible to identity-based bullying, harassment, and incivility from many of their classmates.

## Queer affirming pedagogy in Safe Spaces

While the most recent “Slate of Hate” in Tennessee and numerous other states has upheld trans-/homophobic policies, there are still ways teachers can be allies and work toward a safer space for their sexual and gender minorities. Teaching is seeking to develop competency and methods (Gay, 2010). Pedagogy is the posture that upholds planning, instruction, and assessment. Even many teacher allies are now afraid to say gay or openly support their Queer students as a direct result of legislation for fear of retribution. A basic knowledge of LGBTQ+ terminology can help teachers better understand how to serve the needs of marginalized groups.

Keeping this context in mind, I now offer suggestions for teachers to develop a Queer affirming posture in their classroom. This framework builds on Kishimoto’s (2018) work around antiracist pedagogy:

1. Develop a deeper self-knowledge about one’s gender and sexual identity and how gender roles and compulsory heteronormativity shaped these identities.
2. Acquire a new information base about the role that gender and cisheterosexism play in educational policies and practices.
3. De-center the self and extend empathy to increase one’s knowledge base about diverse genders and orientations.
4. Become activists to develop skills and competencies to combat gender and orientation inequities in work, school, and community settings.

**Representation.** Queer representation is another issue that teachers need to be familiar with. The importance of representation cannot be understated. LGBTQ+ representation was an important part of each participant’s story. Whether this was representation through books and

curriculum, media and pop culture, or other openly Queer people, participants repeatedly reported a positive influence on their experiences and identity when they were able to see another openly gay person. This person could be present in their daily life, history, literature, or other media and pop culture.

Queerness is a concept that we individually and collectively ascribe expectations to. This can lead to what individuals believe being Queer does and does not mean. These ascribed norms can influence the personal conception of what qualifies as an LGBTQ+ identity. These ideas develop through exposure to external representations and dialogue across communities, public figures, and media. This can be challenging for minority youth who apply their conception of what Queerness should be to appearance and personal style, communication, and how they spend their time. This can lead to shame and additional otherness if LGBTQ+ youth feel as if they do not fit those norms or expectations. One common feeling is “not gay enough” to belong or to be taken seriously. Teachers also need to be aware that many students may have a beginning understanding of their own journey but not possess the necessary vocabulary to describe those feelings.

Individuality and personal expression is not only an important aspect of Queer student identity, but also teenage identity development. All of my study participants reported struggling with their body image and personal expression. Teachers need to be okay with students who do not conform to stereotypical ideas of gender presentation, specifically those students who may exist outside of the gender binary or appear more androgynous.

Representation takes many forms, and a few participants even mentioned the positive influence that openly Queer instructors had on their identities. While many professionals may

also feel unsafe coming out in the current climate, LGBTQ+ teachers need to realize the importance of their presence for their students. Claiming their personal identity in the professional sphere can be challenging and risky, but this type of embodied presence can also help LGBTQ+ feel safer and more welcome in educational spaces. In addition, non-LGBTQ+ teachers, like Mr. Green, have an important role to play through active displays of allyship.

Representation through books is a good start, but teachers must be willing to move beyond allyship and advocate for marginalized students. All teachers must be aware of our social positions and identities and know how to imagine and develop equitable institutions and societies for all. In order to do so, teachers must maintain a disposition of curiosity and establish a commitment to lifelong learning. This includes challenging assumptions and fostering critical, analytical skills, about multilayered identities and the sociocultural environments and literacy practices that shape our identities.

In order to work toward educational equity, language and literacy must be viewed as tools to uplift the marginalized, dismantle dominant texts and narratives, and explicitly unmask and unmake oppressive systems through critique of discourses of power. This includes a commitment to pursue social justice for all members of society. Teaching is a profession with inherent ethical and moral obligations to the wellbeing of all students and educators. Teachers must respect and engage all people with humility, empathy, and grace. In addition to religion and representation, teachers need to be aware of how LGBTQ+ students experience and navigate spaces on campus. The idea of a safe or safer space depended upon the support students received from teachers and administrators.

**Addressing anti-LGBTQ+ Behaviors.** Teachers possess great power in their roles as they are “dispensers of knowledge and evaluators...of what students have learned” (Thayer-Bacon, 2003, p. 246). Teachers plan, implement, and assess student progress as well as develop relationships with students to help them see and to reach their potential. Not only do teachers wield great power over student learning and future success, but teachers are responsible for the safety and the well-being of their students. Teachers therefore hold immense influence in affecting the quality of students’ daily lives as they monitor and witness student behaviors toward their peers as well as how teachers and administrators treat students (Thayer-Bacon, 2003). Because of the unique positionality of teachers, educator preparation programs must prepare pre-service teacher candidates who are willing to respect and to affirm intersectional student identities. In order to do this, critical teacher dispositions (Laughter et al., 2020) should guide Educator Preparation Programs as they assess the professional competencies and dispositions of teacher candidates.

Whether it is basic LGBTQ+ vocabulary or personal introspections, teachers need to be aware of what their students are experiencing and how gender and sexuality influence an individual's education. Some peers and families may be ignorant of the Queer experience and others may be unwilling to unlearn their prejudice or religious beliefs. One example is students using gay in a negative way. While some people do use gay slurs knowingly and maliciously, there are others who do not understand the significance of a phrase like “that’s so gay.” Therefore, teachers need to be willing to address anti-Queer rhetoric. Shifting from pedagogy to teaching, the suggestions for classroom practice reflect four areas: 1) the syllabus and course

expectations, 2) classroom management and student discipline, 3) conscious language and active disruption of norms, and 4) class activities and curricular connections.

If school and classroom teachers are truly going to be a safe space for all students regardless of identity, then teachers must be willing to disrupt systemic injustice, including homophobic slurs, bullying, and the use of microaggressions. This starts with clearly outlining course expectations and can be communicated effectively through the syllabus with a civility statement or more explicit classroom rules. Many teachers have rules about respect in their syllabus. Teachers should be more explicit when establishing course norms. For example, expanding the language around what respect means: “No slurs or harassment of any kind will be tolerated in this classroom, including but not limited to, religious, racial, homophobic, sexist, ableist.”

The next step is intervention. Once expectations have been delineated, if teachers hear or see something, they must say something. Teachers must be willing to explicitly address any anti-LGBTQ+ comments. One common microaggression is when students use gay in a negative manner. In this example, I do not mean an actively hostile insult hurled at another student. Instead, I mean if a student were to be “joking” or using gay as a synonym for dumb or stupid. Teachers can approach this as an educational opportunity, framing it as a need for more precise vocabulary.

A memory from my time teaching English I: “Dude, this computer is so gay.” I approached my student, and I asked him what was wrong. This was the year before my district went one-to-one, so my class was in the computer lab next door working on research papers. He showed me his computer was not working properly, and I asked him what he said. Expressing his

frustration, he repeated the comment. I told him I was unaware computers had a sexuality. He scoffed and replied, “You know what I mean, Ms. Stroud.” After assuring him I did not know what he meant, he quickly began an attempt to justify his use as “it’s just something that we say.” In response, I said, “It sounds like you’re using it to say stupid. Your vocabulary is fantastic, and you’re smart enough to pick a better word.” He apologized, amended his previous statement, and we found a working computer for him to use.

If student behavior is more hostile and is aimed at an individual, then the teacher must not only address it, but also follow through with the discipline measures for any use of inappropriate language. Teachers must be willing to enforce discipline on the classroom level to maintain a positive classroom climate. This teacher intervention becomes increasingly more important when considering participant experiences with administrators at their schools regarding trans and homophobic bullying, particularly their lack of support and follow through for disciplining students who harassed or bullied their LGBTQ+ peers.

**Activities and curricular connections.** Some teachers took a passive role in homophobia and did not address anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, but in some cases, the teachers were actively responsible for creating an unsafe space, usually under the guise of classroom discussion or essay topics. Teachers need to be cognizant of topics and discussions that privilege dominant systems of power and silence Queer students. For example, two participants who were enrolled in high school prior to the marriage equality act were asked to debate the pros of cons “gay marriage.” Regardless of the topic, teachers should not expect Queer students to justify their existence in the classroom as every student embodies a rightful presence (Barton & Tan, 2020). A debate over the merits of heterosexuality would be unthinkable, and teachers need to be aware

of the potential of harmful or threatening remarks that could arise as a result. Queer students have a right to safety and the expectation their identity will not be attacked.

One simple strategy to create a safer space is to respect student pronouns. Teachers can include pronouns and names on a “getting to know you” or “back to school” sheet. An important, yet small distinction, is to allow students to differentiate the name listed on the school roster versus the name with which they identify. It is imperative that while teachers work to create and to maintain safe classroom spaces for all students, they continue to remember that not all sexual minority youth have families who support them, so even if a student feels safe enough to list pronouns or a name that differs from the record, teachers need to ask if it is okay to use when contacting parents or guardians. Teachers do not want to be responsible for accidentally outing a student, especially if they were honoring the student’s wishes.

English Language Arts (ELA) content and methods are responsible for exploring the intimate history and relationships between literacy, language, intersectional identities, and education. Activist struggles, social movements, and political struggle are integral to ELA content and methods, and it is imperative to challenge binary thinking. Every student embodies a rightful presence in the classroom and the literacies, histories, and knowledge they bring to the classroom are valuable. Every student deserves to be supported, affirmed, and to feel safe, especially marginalized populations of gender and sexual minorities. Teachers must develop academic skills and concepts, cultural competence, to best facilitate student empowerment.

An important intersection between what teachers can do and LGBTQ+ representation, is analyzing Queer content in literature and media. Building upon the requirements of Cart and Jenkins’s Queer Consciousness (QC) category (2006, 2018), the Bechdel Test (1985), and the



Vito Russo Test (1981), I propose a set of parameters to analyze LGBTQ+ representation in YAL and other media based on what my participants indicated they would have liked to see in their own classrooms:

- The text has at least two named characters with diverse sexual and gender identities.
- Both characters are identifiably LGBTQ+.
- They support one another in some way.
- At least one character is not predominantly defined by their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (i.e., they are complex with unique character traits).
- The characters speak to one another about something other than their Queer identities.
- The characters must matter to the plot, meaning if they were removed the story would change significantly.
- The immediate community and/or chosen family affirm the characters' identities.
- The majority of the plot does not revolve around Queer identity trauma.

Diverse books also need to include joy. Queer YAL should not only be coming-out stories or stories of unrequited love and trauma. Intersectional YAL and education have the potential to transform lives and provide a foundation for a more equitable society. An objective for transformative learning is to realize the potential for an uncomfortable experience to become a positive event since it can be the catalyst for transformation (Chen, 2014; Hess et al., 2018). Thus, diverse texts can be used as a tool for students to explore their own identities, particularly for minoritized individuals who exist outside the normative experience.

Whether novels, curriculum, or Queer bodies, it is imperative to include the perspectives of LGBTQ+ students and teachers regarding representation. This work is important for all

students, regardless of gender expression and sexual orientation. As a starting point, diverse and affirming multicultural young adult literature can provide students with opportunities to experience windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990) to explain how children see themselves in books. It is critical to understand that students cannot truly learn about themselves unless they also learn about others. Whether a window to offer a view into Queer experiences, a sliding door to allow access points to become a part of that world, or a mirror to reflect one's culture, YAL with affirming LGBTQ+ themes and content holds the potential to help students build empathy and their identity.

If the aim of education is to create critical thinkers and a more equitable society, then it is imperative for educator preparation programs to recruit and train preservice teachers who view the classroom as a site for social change (Laughter et al., 2022). Teachers must be willing and prepared to serve diverse student populations who have been othered and minoritized along racial, sexual, trans and/or gender non-conforming lines. If teachers are not willing to serve students who identify as LGBTQ+ and/or students of color, then they should consider their purpose for being in education.

Educators are responsible for creating and sustaining a safe environment for all students regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or race and ethnicity. Educators and practitioners must understand how LGBTQ+ youth experience school environments in order to reduce and eliminate homo-/transphobic harassment and bullying. Teachers must meet students where they are and respect them for who they are, regardless of personal beliefs. A willingness to accept students where they are and on their own terms means educators and administrators must “suspend their own views to listen attentively and generously” (Thayer-Bacon, 2003, p. 247) to

students and get to know them where they are. If a safe space is truly going to be maintained for all students at all times, teachers must be willing not only to support diverse student identities, but they must be willing to affirm students' identities. This idea must start when candidates begin their teacher training.

**The role of administrators and stakeholders.** The next implication for practice is the need for administrative support in disciplinary matters. All education stakeholders need to be made aware of the lack of support that students reported regarding disciplinary actions for peers who used homo-/transphobic slurs, gay in a negative way, threats and intimidation, and physical violence. Students who used homophobic slurs and harassed Queer students were consistently not disciplined. Administrators either did not act at all, or they would speak with the student about the behavior briefly, and with no follow through. This lack of intervention was also seen on the classroom level. Many participants reported that their school took suggestions from students in the form of student focus groups or suggestion boxes. However, these same students shared that once they filled out the questionnaire or provided a suggestion, nothing ever changed at their school.

### **Implications for Future Research**

While further research that centers student experiences is required, it would be interesting to hear from teachers regarding their experiences with witnessing homo-/transphobic bullying and harassment among students and how teachers approach pronouns and names that differ from the class roster. This research could dig into the similarities and differences in experiences between Queer teachers and non-Queer teachers.

Another interesting future study would be to follow up with transgender students to explore how they would categorize or label the stages of their transition. As vocabulary for transgender experience becomes more widespread, and more viciously attacked, the field will need to be nimble to keep up with social changes.

Other future studies should look more in depth at how students feel about the removal of LGBTQ+ representation in Tennessee classrooms. Moving forward, future studies should complete a subsequent analysis of the race/ethnicity of characters in LGBTQ+ book award winners, a content analysis of lesbian portrayals, and a qualitative interview study to center student voices regarding LGBTQ+ content. This work might support the development of curricula that include Queer representation more broadly.

## **Conclusion**

This project began before House Bill 800 (HB0800) was codified into law. Currently, teachers in the state of Tennessee are legally restricted in what they can discuss and teach. Citing the public welfare, this act first went into effect in the 2021-2022 school year:

Textbooks, instructional materials, and supplemental instructional materials that promote, normalize, support, or address controversial social issues, such as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgender (LGBT) lifestyles are inappropriate; and WHEREAS, the promotion of LGBT issues and lifestyles in public schools offends a significant portion of students, parents, and Tennessee residents with Christian values; and WHEREAS, the promotion of LGBT issues and lifestyles should be subject to the same restrictions and limitations placed on the teaching of religion in public schools;

While teachers have been issued a gag order, there are still ways they can support and affirm diverse students. What these look like, and how to push back against such oppressive legislation, remains to be seen in classrooms across the state.

In Chapter Five, I presented the implications for practice and research based upon my findings and cross-case analysis in Chapter Four. The implications for teachers began with what teachers need to know about their LGBTQ+ students before I moved into what teachers can do. Teachers need to be aware of the increased risks these students face as well as how Queer students experience relationships with their families and in their home lives and the role peer groups play in educational environments.

These suggestions toward a Queer affirming pedagogy included the following: teacher posture and reflection, the importance of Queer representation, the need for teacher intervention to address trans-/homophobic microaggressions, harassment, and bullying. Next, I outlined the implications and suggestions for classroom activities and curricular connections to help teachers develop a safer space for gay students. I briefly explained the role of administrators and stakeholders before sharing areas for future research and ending with a chapter summary.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A**

#### **Recruiting Announcement**

Hi, my name is Ashley Stroud, and I am a 5th year doc student at UTK looking to recruit trans & Queer folks to interview for my dissertation study. I am hoping to learn about the experiences of LGBTQ+ folks and how their identities intersect in order to help better prepare preservice teachers to affirm diverse gender and sexual identity of their students. The interviews are completely conversational, and usually last about an hour. If this is something you might be interested in, I'd love to see if we could schedule time to meet. Please reach out to me by email at [astroud1@vols.utk.edu](mailto:astroud1@vols.utk.edu) or by phone at 865-414-3800.



## Appendix B

### Informed Consent

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## Informed Consent for Research

### Consent for Research Participation

**Research Study Title:** Reading the rainbow: Exploring educational experiences of the LGBTQ+ community

**Researcher(s):** Ashley Stroud, University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
Dr. Judson Laughter, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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#### Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring the educational experiences of students who are LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, etc.). This study seeks to understand the factors that hinder student learning, including homophobic bullying, microaggressions, and a lack of support(s). You are being asked to participate in this research study because you meet the criteria for inclusion as a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

#### What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to gain a better understanding of how to prepare preservice teachers to effectively support diverse student populations in educational settings, specifically, LGBTQ+ students.

#### Who is conducting this research study?

This study is being conducted by Ashley Stroud, a researcher and doctoral candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

#### How long will I be in the research study?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and will consist of one interview lasting between 45 to 60 minutes. This interview may be conducted remotely via Zoom or in person to accommodate individual schedules and geographical locations. Additionally, one follow-up session will be required after the data are analyzed in order to ensure the findings are valid and accurately reflect your shared experiences. This member check will require approximately 15 to 30 minutes and can be conducted via email, Zoom, or in person. If you agree to be in this study, your participation will last for approximately 1.5 hours.

What will happen if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research study”?

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked questions about your life and educational experiences as they relate to sexual orientation and/or gender identity. You are not required to answer the questions, and you may pass on any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. At any time, you may notify the researcher that you would like to stop the interview and your participation in the study.

The interview and the member check will occur at a location chosen by the participant or on Zoom. The member check will occur after the interview to ensure the researcher has accurately reflected your experiences.

What happens if I say “No, I do not want to be in this research study”?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later.

Either way, your decision won’t affect your grades, your relationship with your instructors, or standing with the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Either way, your decision won’t affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to participate in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, please contact Ashley Stroud at [astroud1@vols.utk.edu](mailto:astroud1@vols.utk.edu) and you will be withdrawn from the project.

If any information has already been collected, then the data can be withdrawn unless the data have been de-identified and the code key destroyed.

Are there any possible risks to me?

While highly unlikely, it is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information. However, this risk is small because of the procedures used to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

The level of risk associated with this current study is minimal. You may feel uncomfortable sharing your opinions and experiences; however, please know all responses will be kept confidential, and your responses will not affect your status as a participant in any way. You may choose not to answer or may terminate your participation in the interview at any time. Additionally, some participants may experience an emotional reaction to the research topic.

In order to minimize this risk, I will provide trigger warnings for specific interview questions and provide a list of resources and available community support(s) for participants at the conclusion of the interview.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

I do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help me to learn more about affirming sexual and gender minorities, and I hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

There is a possibility that you may benefit from being in the study, but there is no guarantee that will happen. Possible benefits include the opportunity to share your experiences. Even if you don't benefit, your participation may help us to learn more about the challenges LGBTQ+ students face in education and how teachers can affirm diverse student identities. The knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

I will protect the confidentiality of your information through the use of pseudonyms.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure research is conducted properly.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

I will keep your information to use for future research. But your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from the research data collected.

We may share your research data with other researchers without asking for your consent again, but it will not contain information that could directly identify you.

Will it cost me anything to be in this research study?

If you agree to be in this study, the only potential costs include transportation to and from an in person interview and/or data charges associated with mobile/electronic devices.

What else do I need to know?

About 10-12 people will take part in this study. Because of the small number of participants in this study, it is possible that someone could identify you based on the information you share.

If we let any new information that may change your mind about being in the study, we will tell you. If that happens, you may be asked to sign a new consent form.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researcher, Ashley Stroud, at [astroud1@vols.utk.edu](mailto:astroud1@vols.utk.edu) or 865-414-3800. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Judson Laughter at [jlaughter3@utk.edu](mailto:jlaughter3@utk.edu) or 865-974-8385.

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
1534 White Avenue  
Blount Hall, Room 408  
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529  
Phone: 865-974-7697  
Email: [utkirb@utk.edu](mailto:utkirb@utk.edu)

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

Name of Adult Participant	Signature of Adult Participant	Date

**Researcher Signature** (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the study to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to be in the study.

<u>Ashley Stroud</u>		
Name of Research Team Member	Signature of Research Team Member	Date

## Appendix C

### Interview Guide

1. How's your week been?
2. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
3. How do you identify?
  - a. Can you tell me a little bit about the process of discovering your identity?
  - b. Do you have a story about coming out?
4. At about what age did you first realize you were \_\_\_\_\_?
5. What has it been like for you after coming out/transitioning to yourself and to others?
  - a. How open are you about your sexual orientation/gender identity? At work? At school? At home? With new acquaintances?
  - b. How does your identity influence your experiences at school?
  - c. Tell me about your teachers (past or present).
    - i. Tell me about a teacher who made you feel supported. Is there a specific event or moment you can share?
    - ii. Can you tell me about a teacher who didn't make you feel supported?
    - iii. Can you share a story about a moment when you felt safe or unsafe in school?
  - d. Tell me about your family. How has your sexual orientation/gender identity affected your relationship with your family? Do you have support from your family?
6. What does the word "discrimination" mean to you?
  - a. Can you tell me about any problems you have faced because of discrimination based on your sexual orientation/gender identity?
  - b. Have you ever heard of a story about an LGBT person facing discrimination in your state?
7. How are you involved in the lesbian, gay, bi, trans, two-spirit, intersex and/or queer (LGBTQIA2S+) communities?
8. What is one thing that makes you feel safe in school?
9. Do you have concerns about body image? Do body image pressures and ageism in the lesbian, gay, bi, trans, two-spirit, intersex and/or queer (LGBTTTIQ) communities affect you?
10. "Can you describe for me why it's important that our communities and our laws treat people equally?"
  - a. "How does that make you feel?" "Can you tell me about...?" "Can you describe...?" "I'm curious about..."

## **Vita**

Ashley Renee Stroud was born to Tonya Renee Tackett and Lyndell Preston Stroud Sr. in Knoxville, TN on June 27, 1988. An alumna of Knoxville West High School, she always dreamed of becoming a Volunteer. In 2006, that dream came true as she moved into a dorm and began her undergraduate studies. She earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English in 2011 and a Master of Science in Teacher Education in 2012, both from the University of Tennessee. Prior to returning to UT to pursue her Ph.D., she taught high school English. She began her graduate studies in 2018 with Dr. Judson Laughter as her advisor. Dr. Laughter encouraged her to explore all of her interests in classes and research. Drs. Laughter and Groenke were instrumental in her journey as an educator, inspiring a deep passion for social justice and equity in education during her master's program. In addition to supervising teacher candidates in the field, Ashley has taught reading education and English education courses at the graduate level as well as an introductory education class to undergraduates who wish to pursue teacher licensure. Ashley will graduate with a Ph.D. in Education with a concentration in Teacher Education and a specialization in English Education in May 2023.